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"AN IMAGINATIVE ENCOUNTER WITH THE OLD TESTAMENT
A CURRICULUM FOR ADULTS"

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ABSTRACT

AN IMAGINATIVE ENCOUNTER WITH THE OLD TESTAMENT
A CURRICULUM FOR ADULTS

by

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United Theological Seminary 1992

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This project is intended to address biblical illiteracy among adults by providing readers and teachers with an imaginative approach to the Old Testament. Three major elements make up the thirteen session curriculum. First, a schematic chronology of the history of Israel serves as the course outline. Second, readers are taught how to engage and enter into stories through an inductive or discovery method. Third, the curriculum incorporates insights from the literary method known as "reader response criticism" which contends that a text's meaning stems in part from reader involvement and interpretation. This curriculum promotes personal interpretation.

This doctoral project was developed within the congregation of First United Methodist Church, Bluffton, Ohio. In most respects the church is very much like most other local churches. Therefore, this project and the approach it develops can be used in any other local church.

Demographics

First Methodist Church for many years has been a reflection of the older population characteristic of the village. As recently as 1987 there were but six teen aged members of the church. By way of contrast, there were at the same time 42 members over the age of 80. Until very recently the congregation on Sunday morning was a predominantly older congregation. Very few young families attended and fewer still attended Sunday School. Approximately one tenth of the congregation [31 people] are listed on the shut-in roll.

In more recent years a gradual change has occurred in the demographics of the church. Younger people, some of whom are beginning their families, have been attending church in larger numbers. In 1989 for instance, twelve persons were baptized. During church members of all ages appreciate hearing the sounds of babies babbling, children whispering, and feet tapping against the pews during the singing of hymns. Over the past three years there has been a steady increase in the number of younger families in attendance. These figures indicate long-hoped for growth. When I first arrived and began "junior sermons" during the worship service there were weeks when the only child in the first pew to listen was my son David. In the past year this number has steadily increased. During the fall of 1990 nearly 12 children per week have assembled at the "junior sermon" time.

Single younger people are a minority. Single, formerly married/widow/widowers represent a significant number of people in the congregation.

Though the village's population is quite stable, changes in industry and the appeal of the small, safe place are bringing in new people. Bluffton is becoming a part of the global economic village. In 1988 a Japanese corporation built an automobile rubber products manufacturing plant on the corporate limits. Over 200 people work for this company. On the eastern edge of the corporation limits a German technical products company is completing a new manufacturing plant. These international corporations add to the existing industries which had for years been among the major employers for the village. With the new addition have come new people, and two new housing developments.

The Congregation

First Church's congregation can be described by the following four groups:

1. Older/retired college educated
2. Younger/still working college educated
3. Older/retired non-college educated
4. Younger/still working non-college educated

A significant minority of church members are college-educated former professional people including the president of the local bank, teachers, nurses, and other professionals. This group of people will always attend College forums, lectures, cultural events, and official functions. People from this group also make up the majority of the Wednesday morning Bible study group. This group will also attend book reviews that I present in the fall and spring of each year. This group has for many years established the tone and concern for the church. However, this group is perceptibly aging and is losing some of its influence.

There are a number of college educated younger people who are now active in church. This group includes college professors, elementary and high school teachers, nurses and managers or entrepreneurs. This group is still quite actively involved in work. These people will generally not be found in Bible study, though many of them support the College and will attend cultural events.

First Church also has a number of people who have retired from working for the railroad, the Post Office, from local industries, or from major automobile producers in neighboring Lima, the county seat. Among the more distressing phenomena in recent years has been the growth of specific interest groups outside the Church. In a previous generation the major gathering place was the church. Many retired and shut-in members fondly recall meetings with other people in the context of church. However, in more recent years social service agencies have usurped what used to be the church's function. In Bluffton the largest institution besides the College is the Senior Citizens' Center which boasts of a membership of over 600. In the December 10, 1990 issue of *Newsweek* magazine, the cover article pointed towards the baby-boom generation which has only recently returned to church. Characteristic of the "Baby-Boomers" generation (born between the years 1946 and 1964) is the demand for specialized ministry in the form of every imaginable "support group", from aerobic workouts to alcoholics anonymous, infant care to career assessment. Like most other small to modest size churches, First Church cannot compete with specialized interests for membership.

There are a significant number of younger people in this community who have not graduated from a four year undergraduate program and who are still actively working. Their work includes automobile mechanics, U.P.S. delivery man, entrepreneurs who own their own businesses. First Methodist Church has only one active farmer in its membership. This man has steadily set the standard or come very close to setting standards for grain farming and hog raising for the state of Ohio.

Recently a newer member of the church and of the same age group has been teaching. Her reflections mirror mine. She finds the work very demanding. Simply keeping people on task and focused on a topic is very difficult. In my estimation, this single group is the most problematic and yet the most crucial element in the church. Doubtless my project will have to include a major

participation by some of these people. This group of people has also enjoyed the most growth in recent months. Over the past two years seven new families have joined the congregation. The influx of new people has brought changes in the class makeup and demeanor. Newer members are beginning to affect a more serious and disciplined attitude within the class.

In addition to the class for people in their 20's-40's there is an older class. This class focuses on the International Lesson series.

Sunday School is not the only educational ministry of the church. Ever since I was appointed to First Church I have led two mid-week Bible study groups. Each of these groups has sustained Bible study during the academic year. The course of study takes its cue from the projects on which I am working at the time. This means that during the past four years these two groups have sustained study over the Old Testament, the history of Israel, the prophets, and New Testament interpretation. These two groups have been the laboratory in which I have developed the approach which I will describe in chapter three.

Very thankfully and fortunately, the four groups are not discernable on Sunday morning or in other church contexts. People talk with each other, share concerns and worship together without reference to background or educational experience or degrees attained. In part this may be due to the fact that during three recent ministers' tenures there have been a variety of crises that have proven to be crucibles in which the membership had to make decisions regarding identity and community. During my predecessor's tenure, for instance, six families exited the church declaring that the church simply didn't help them "grow spiritually". This characterization still baffles many of the older members as well as practically the entire "Baby-boomers" class. In all candor, I can understand how conservative or evangelical people would be frustrated by the church and especially the Sunday morning class. The preacher blithely used the term "Deity" for God and frequently used "Parent" in his prayers. Such impersonal vocabulary is an affront to evangelical sensitivities. Moreover, anyone wishing to learn more about the scriptures through sustained study would have been more than sufficiently frustrated by Sunday morning efforts. Previous ministers did not exhibit strong leadership nor effective preaching. Among the comments included in annual evaluations by the pastor parish relations committee are statements of approval indicating that I "preach from the Bible" and assist the congregation to grow spiritually.

Current Assessment

As the village of Bluffton is enjoying economic growth so First Church has been growing as well. The actual membership, once reported inaccurately as 342 is actually 263. Average attendance, once reported at a phenomenal 130 is more accurately reported at 115. The Sunday School program has improved from a minimal two or three children per week to an average attendance of 60 over the past four months. Chairmen conduct their committee meetings. Committees wrestle

with their own agenda and financial needs. The figures that have been reported between 1987-1990 are accurate and can be verified through church records.

At present First United Methodist Church enjoys a welcomed surge of enthusiasm and renewed hope. Younger families are beginning to frequent worship services and Sunday School. Children are in church again. Worship and Sunday School attendance figures are up. College students are attending more frequently and in larger numbers. Leadership from within the congregation has emerged and has been increasingly assuming the task of envisioning and implementing ministries.

The tasks to which attention must be given concern the disciplines and study of the baby-boom generation as well as the continued growth of the church and assimilation of new members. This project is intended to

1. Strengthen the church
2. Include new members in study
3. Augment the membership's memory and imagination through a study of the Old Testament.

Theological Presuppositions

Personal reflections

Theological reflection is always personal. "At its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography. Aquinas, Calvin, Barth, Tillich, working out their systems in their own ways and in their own language are telling us the stories of their lives, and if you press them far enough, even at their most cerebral and forbidding, you find an experience of flesh and blood, a human face smiling or frowning or weeping or covering its eyes before something that happened once." [1] Thus, I believe, this statement must begin personally.

I cannot remember a time when my family and I were not in church. Though we did not talk much about church things in our home it was assumed that we would be in church, Sunday school, and youth group. Theological reflection did not dominate family conversation at the supper table. Our religious outlook was something that we took for granted. The family faith was of a general sort. We believed in a general notion of God and that God has an intention for the world. Our ethics were oriented around duty and responsibility. In our house there was a tacit assumption that there was a way in which one should live and treat others. But we never talked about our perspective very much. Correspondingly, I was brought up with a vague notion that the Bible was one of the components that was supposed to be important in and for the Christian faith. Ironically, the Bible was among the most overlooked or neglected parts of faithful living. Practically every home had at least one Bible in it. However, the Bible and especially the Old Testament with the exception of the Psalms, was simply not widely read. This characterization is not an assumption

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[1] Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 3.

based merely on conjecture. This description is characteristic of my family. How is it that the scriptures have publicly been given high importance for some while at the same time privately being essentially ignored by a large number of faithful church members?

I have always been interested in learning about the Bible. One of the singularly memorable moments in high school youth group was the unit on Psalms taught by our youth leader's husband. He taught a multi-week series on the Psalms. I was intrigued by how he made old verses come alive through interpretation. On my bookshelves I still have the prize book for achieving the highest score on the final test. However, insofar as I can determine, the Bible itself played little role in my sense of call into ministry. Critical questions about the Bible's authority did not arise during the class presentations. It never occurred to me that something written by a human hand could not also be the result of God's action. The authority of the Bible was a given; it was assumed. Issues of historical usage didn't cloud this orientation. Indeed, historical usage gave further evidence of how significant the scriptures were to the ancients which gave further illustration of the scriptures' potential for contemporary readers.

My first call to ministry came during my junior year of high school. In the early 1960's youth groups in the Boston and sub-urban areas surrounding the city were caught up in the idealism of the era. Many times we visited Christians of different background. We worshiped with Chinese Christians in Boston's Chinatown. We were caught up in the grand social issues of the day, especially the Civil Rights movement and Martin Luther King, Jr.. We attended folk concerts in Boston's Public Garden. Getting involved in resolving the social problems confronting our nation was a part of what it meant to be Christian. We were much less concerned with doctrine than we were with investment of personal energies in solving those problems. At the same time I remember becoming interested in the preacher's task. I wanted to see the preacher's manuscript prior to the actual delivery. I wanted to see what his printed words looked like, to see how they came alive in the presentation. I can still remember the minister's theme for an Easter sermon that has to be dated sometime prior to 1964. He talked about the disciples running with the news of the Resurrection. The sheer exuberance of his presentation and the startling excitement of the Resurrection made my fingers tingle. Call always has some kind of form and substance. My call consisted of preaching and teaching.

However, a call to ministry does not obviate questions. Questions surrounding the Bible emerged early in my own thinking during the critical years of college. Though I knew the Bible should be important, the time came when I had to come to terms with the fact that for me the Bible may have been important in the past, it may yet be important in the future; but for the moment the Bible was simply a valuable book. My Bible was a gift that my aunt and uncle had given me for graduation from high school. During my crisis in faith, I chose not to discard their gift Bible.

Not until nearly six years later did the latent power of the scriptures become apparent to me. During my fifth year of teaching I was introduced to the Bible as a living book through the life of a Christian man with whom I taught high school in the early 1970's. Never before had I met anyone who had integrated his faith, his reading of the Bible, and his work as teacher and coach. Prior to meeting this man the only people who quoted the Bible to me were people who had memorized portions of the Bible and had something of a canned answer for practically every problem or issue. But proof-texting or treating the Bible as if it were some kind of thumb-indexed yellow pages of "what to do when" never stirred my imagination. An aggressively literal acceptance and interpretation of the Bible felt confrontational, never inviting. Thus, when my colleague alluded to biblical principles or to specific passages in the context of his thinking, teaching or coaching, the power of the Bible began to impress me and stir my own interest and imagination.

One aspect of my introduction to the power of the Bible has always haunted me. At the time of my conversion in the fall of 1972, I was not assisted in any manner (of which I am aware) by the minister of the local church of which I was a member. Though the preacher offered mid-week Bible study, his instruction never appealed to my imagination or spirit. His preaching was singularly dull and apparently uninspired. He made little sense and didn't touch on anything that breathed the breath of real life. Ever since beginning ministry as a preacher I have been haunted by the memory that when I was a member of a church, the preacher's Bible study could not have made less difference in my personal or professional life.

Though I had experienced a discernable conversion, my faith was tentative. I had lots of questions. When I decided to take the Bible seriously my questions did not go away. Indeed, taking the Bible seriously seemed to evoke more questions. I wondered about sections of the Bible that are obviously not to be taken literally. Surely some of the peculiar rites of the Old Testament were never intended to be carried out in modern cultures. Surely Jesus' words about cutting off a hand or gouging out an eye were meant to be hyperbole. But what do they mean? What kinds of authority do various parts of the Bible have? What kinds of intellectual functions must be suspended in order to accept the Bible? Is it possible for a critical thinker to read the Bible faithfully?

In order to answer these questions I began reading in the field of historical-criticism, or what used to be called "higher critical studies". This approach represented, for me, a welcome path into the scriptures. Critical questions abounded in my thought. There were scores of scholars whose work represented an authentic and valid focus of study and means by which the Bible could be taken seriously. For the scholar it seemed that any question was in bounds. Some of my seminary class-mates and a significant number of church members, however, were not so prone to approach

the scriptures with such critical questions. Many of the more conservative people demanded an acceptance of the Bible without questions.

The tension between the critical scholars with whom I felt a personal affinity, if not yet a shared skill, and the conservative faithful of both seminary and church has never entirely abated. Somehow it seemed to me that both perspectives were valid expressions of faith. Both took the Bible seriously. What differed was *how* each group took the Bible seriously. The tension and conflict between the different approaches came most sharply to focus for me during my tenure in the West Park United Methodist Church in Columbus, Ohio. A young, college-aged woman belonged to a very conservative Bible study group. At practically every point of my work (preaching, teaching, and writing) she challenged me. She contended that I had not dealt appropriately with the Bible. I countered by suggesting she read Leander Keck's book, *Taking the Bible Seriously*. I loaned her the volume. Within a week she caustically commented, "It seems that in order to take the Bible seriously we have to ignore the Bible altogether!" Her opinion was that her interpretation was somehow, "pure Bible" whereas my inclination and Leander Keck's scholarly work represented too much intellectualism. Her attitude was that she had seized the high ground of authority and interpretation. Thus, any serious critical study on my part was rendered by her, at best on the defensive, at worst irrelevant or heretical.

What has always intrigued me is that proponents of both sides seem unable or unwilling to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other's perspective. In both seminary and in parish work I have attempted to span the apparent chasm between the poles of what some call "Fundamentalism" on the one hand and "Liberalism" on the other. Neither is a very accurate or helpful term. Indeed, William Willimon cuts to the center of the matter when he observes that "Both fundamentalists and historical critics assumed that it is possible for the Bible to make sense apart from the living, breathing community which makes it make sense. Both groups assumed that it was possible to understand the Bible, the church's book, without being converted into the church's faith." [2]

The Emergence of the Word of God

This section begins with a personal confession. The notion that every word of the Bible was verbally inspired has never appealed to me. Nor has the notion that every portion and verse of the Bible are on a par with each other. Chain reference Bibles have never been particularly helpful for me. I will not soon forget hearing a preacher declare to a large congregation that if they weren't able to accept the fact that Jonah was swallowed by a whale then they couldn't believe in the Virgin birth of Jesus either. He went on to contend that faithful Christians had to accept certain things in the Bible so that we could accept the Bible in its entirety. His assertions

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[2] William H. Willimon, *Shaped by the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 26.

and claims stunned and appalled me. I thought at the time that surely there had to be another way in which faithful Christians could come to terms with the peculiar world of the Scriptures.

Some people refuse to read the Bible because of the apparent contradictions. There are contradictory statements in the Bible. For instance, Isaiah and Micah envision a time when swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.[3] Joel speaks of a time when plowshares should be refashioned into swords. [4] Isaiah envisions a day when war shall not be learned any more. [5] Ecclesiastes observes that there is always a time for war and a time for peace.[6] Only the miracle of the feeding of the multitudes is recorded in all four Gospels.[7] The three synoptic gospels follow roughly the same chronology. The Gospel of John differs from the other three. When I first began taking the Bible seriously the apparent contradictions concerned me. I had heard some Christians declare that if we are to be faithful we must accept the Bible without contradictions. I was always put off by the intellectual gymnastics through which I was expected to go in order to accept the Bible. Conversely, I have always been attracted to the ambiguity inherent in different interpretations and approaches. A more dynamic understanding of how the Bible came to be appeals to me.[8] I hope this project will be helpful to others.

The following schematic outline illustrates what I believe to be the process by which the people of God perceive the word of the Lord.

event ↓
oral tradition ↓
written pieces ↓
pieces preserved and organized ↓
canons established

The history of God's people began with events of such magnitude that Jews and Christians alike mark their beginnings from those momentous events. For Jews the event was the miraculous event at the Sea of Reeds, i.e. the Exodus. For Christians the event was the person of Jesus of

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[3] Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:1-4

[4] Joel 4:10

[5] Isaiah 2:4

[6] Ecclesiastes 3:8

[7] Mark 6:30-44; Matthew 14:13-21; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13

[8] I have found the following books particularly helpful. James A. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text: Canon As Paradigm* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), Jeremy Silver, *The Story of Scripture: From Oral Tradition to the Written Word* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), and Burton Visotzky, *Reading the Book*, (New York, Anchor, 1991).

Nazareth. These are the formative events. It sometimes comes as a surprise to lay readers that no one wrote about the events at the time of their occurrence. Few people at the time of the events could have articulated clearly what the importance of the event was. Nevertheless, the memory and identity of the people of God begins with the formative event.

These events were remembered and recounted initially through story telling, or what scholars call the oral tradition. As with any story, variations or interpretations are added to the narrative. Eventually and at various times, the oral tradition was preserved in written form. Still later in the process those written pieces that were found to be particularly helpful or instructive were gathered together into collections. These collections became part of the larger, completed corpus of material that undergirded the identity, memory, and theological reflection of the community. In short, the oral tradition was preserved in a written form which became authoritative for the community. The entire collection of works which the community deemed authoritative was then assembled into what we call canon (from the Greek word for *cane*, a standard length of measure). This process took place very gradually and extended through centuries.

At this point insights from the historical-critical method of scholarly study are very helpful. Among the major interpretations of the Torah, the Pentateuch or the Books of Moses, is what scholars call the source theory. Scholars have discerned four major strands of tradition that have been woven together into the books of Moses. One of these strands is called simply "E" for Elohist since that writer used the term *Elhohim* for God. A second strand is called "J" or the Yahwist since the writer uses the term *Yahweh* for the Lord. A third strand gives evidence of having been written by an individual concerned with priestly matters and is, therefore, called "P" or the Priestly writer. The fourth strand of tradition reflects concerns peculiar to the Deuteronomic interpretation of Israel's history. Therefore, the writer of that strand is commonly called "D" for Deuteronomist. I would not suggest that these sophisticated insights be addressed to novice lay readers. However, the insights can be subtly woven into the fabric of Bible study.

For instance, among the first writings in the Old Testament are those by the Deuteronomist, probably written during the period of Exile, when Judah's citizens languished in Babylon. The Deuteronomic writer attempted to interpret Israel's history in order to make sense of the catastrophe which had befallen his beloved nation. I do not find these insights troubling. In fact, I find them extremely helpful. They provide students with length and breadth, height and depth, in short, dimension to the life of faith as the people of God attempted to interpret their lot in 6th Century Babylon. This is only one example of what insights from critical scholars can add to the study of the Scriptures. In no manner should these insights be construed as debunking the authority of the Bible or the action of the Holy Spirit in the formulation of the texts.

Christians speak of the Bible as having authority. One verse is frequently quoted, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness..."[9] What is the nature of the authority that the Bible has?

Over the course years Jews and Christians found that certain writings were particularly helpful and particularly insightful. Certain writings were referred to frequently and used often by individuals and the community. Eventually, a limited number of books became unofficially accepted, through regular or widespread popularity and use. Later yet, a limited number of books were designated as the books through which the will of God, the character of God, the nature of being human and instruction regarding how faithful people should live were discerned. These became Scripture. The books of Scripture, the Bible (Hebrew Bible or Old Testament and the New Testament), have been accepted as the norm against which all further theological and ethical reflection is carried out. But how did specific words and specific books achieve the rank of authority? This brings me to the second schematic diagram.

The people of God		History
identity memory tradition worship	The Word of the Lord	social forces economic forces political forces international events

"Unlike some varieties of religious belief, Christianity [and by implication Judaism as well] contains a vital and indispensable historical component. The character and will of...God...is manifested...in a sequence of historical events of which, for the *Christian* side of biblical faith is the event of the Christ. In the sequence of occurrences surrounding this central *kairos*, including the long march of the people of Israel, the God in whom the disciple community believes is self-revealed." [10] Though it may sound trite to say so, the people of God live in the midst of real history. Frankly, I doubt very much whether many of them ever consciously consider doctrinal formulations or theoretical constructs. My prejudice towards a dynamic *word* stems from the number of times I have heard Christians declare that "people in the Bible should have known better" or "surely they could see...". Characterizations of biblical characters, or any historical characters for that matter, overlook the fact that the people who populate history are people exactly like modern-day Christians. Men and women attempt to raise their children to the best of

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[9] II Timothy 3:16

[10] Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 257-258.

their ability. Decisions about what to do and what to be must be made in the midst of all sorts of forces that swirl and make demands on people. How should people act? What should they do? What should the people of God do as people of faith? These questions had to be answered in the real world of real events. Rather, the people of God attempt to make decisions based on the best that they can determine from their identity, memory, tradition (which includes the Scriptures) and their worship (altar). I suspect that this one fact forms the central element in this entire project. That is, that the people of God have always had to make decisions of faith in the midst of real history. Faith has never been easy. Faith has always been something of a gamble, a risking of life on the basis "I believe." Some Christians may criticize my approach as something akin to making excuses for faithlessness. On first reading my approach may confuse or surprise some readers and students. However, the approach assumes that faithful living remains equally as demanding for modern readers as it ever was for biblical characters. Equally as true is the fact that biblical characters had to live with the same tensions and stresses that surround modern Christians and Jews.

I don't believe that the Bible was ever intended to be a statement of absolute principle for all time, all people, or all places. Instead, the Bible emerged as specific words spoken by specific people at specific times. Therefore, in the diagram illustrated above, the people of God encounter the demands of politics, international and national events, economic influences and concerns. Decisions about action and attitude must be made prior to any verification of the rightness or wrongness of those actions. The community wrestles with the questions and issues and eventually has to make a decision about what God would require for that moment. The image might also be likened to flint on steel. Flint striking steel causes a spark. I do not think that I press the image too far by saying that when the people of God bump up against the demands of history and culture a moment of creativity may happen. I am persuaded that in its original form the word of the Lord is articulated by individuals and/or discerned by the community. Individuals and the community must decide what the will of God is for any given demand on the basis of the best they know and by the insight that they can muster.

The words of people and the word of the Lord were, at one moment, one and the same. The decisions about what constituted the word of the Lord were preserved initially by the courageous individual and community who uttered or heard the original word. Subsequent readers and communities saw the authority of God in the words as well. Recurrent or steady usage and community acceptance played a very important role in identifying legitimate and authentic words of the Lord. Even though some specific expressions, oracles, and words were identified by "thus says the Lord," those words were not immediately accepted as authoritative by the listeners. I contend that the prophetic literature and writings emerged first as words that the majority of

people either would not or could not accept or tolerate. Illustrations from the Old Testament, (Jeremiah) and from the New Testament, (Jesus and later writers) illustrate my argument.

During the initial years of Jeremiah's prophetic career he received little respect. Practically nothing that he said was granted any significant authority by the general population or the king. However, his material was preserved by someone, perhaps Baruch. However, as time passed and events tended to vindicate Jeremiah's words, more and more people began to comprehend the authority of Jeremiah's work. Though the prophet himself did not accompany the Exiles into their exile, his written correspondence with them was saved. At a later time his work was assembled into the finished form of a scroll or book. Even though some of his writing was destroyed during his lifetime [11] large amounts of his writing was preserved by the community at a later time. This is to suggest that a small number of people discerned an authentic word of the Lord in Jeremiah's work during his lifetime. As time passed increasingly large numbers of people discerned the authority of God in his work. Events vindicated the prophet's words. Thus, Jeremiah's work was saved in the corpus of Scripture.

Jesus himself interpreted the Scriptures. In Matthew's Gospel for instance Jesus is pictured as saying, "You have heard it said, but I say unto you...". [12] Is this not clearly an interpretation of the tradition that Jesus and others of his generation had inherited? In the Epistles specific writers and the Christian community interpret the person of Jesus of Nazareth in light of the Old Testament and with a yearning to act as they should as citizens of the Roman Empire.

In the schematic that I posit, the book of Jeremiah, the Gospels, and the Epistles become part of every subsequent generation's tradition. The point is that the word of God for every generation must be discerned by that generation. That's how the Bible emerged in the first place. That's precisely how the people of God had to discern the word of God for their day, their questions, and their dilemmas. In no manner do I contend that this enterprise is an entirely human affair. A large amount of human endeavor is involved in the discernment and articulation of the word of God. I also believe that the Spirit of God has always been at work within individuals and communities as they attempted in the past and as communities attempt in modern times to discern the word of the Lord for their circumstances. In this way I can echo II Timothy 3:16, "All scripture is inspired and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness." The first and second generation Christian movement still read the Old Testament extensively. Eventually the Christian movement developed a corpus of literature which the

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[11] See Jeremiah 26. The King of Judah, Jehoiakim, upon hearing the words dictated by Jeremiah, burned the scroll in a charcoal fire.

[12] Matthew 5:21

Christian Church deemed authoritative for faith. Thus, the Christian movement developed its own canon. Christian Scriptures are an interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Old Testament canon was not officially closed until the Council of Jamnia in 90 C.E. The New Testament canon was not considered closed until the middle of the fourth century, C.E.

The Hebrew term for interpretation is *midrash*. The term stems from the root word דרש , which means "to search or investigate". There are two types of midrash. *Halachah* addresses legal aspects of biblical materials. *Haggadah* deals with non-legal aspects. *Haggadah* can also be translated to mean "narration". Stanley Hauerwas suggests that the first and second generation Christians were doing midrash when they interpreted the Old Testament. [13] Christian *midrashim* became what we call the New Testament. I remain convinced that Christians are still invited and compelled to interpret.[14]

Interpretation is not something that is reserved solely for contemporary academic scholars. Indeed, the hard task of interpretation in the service of discerning the word of God for the current day can be a regular part of the life of faith.

The Task

I believe that God's will and mind can still be apprehended today through careful reading, study, and imaginative engagement with the Scriptures. Through the mystery of faith and God's Spirit, a modern reader can discern the mind of God. Both Jewish and Christian people must continue to do what every generation has always done. The people of God always interpret life through the perspective of the Old and/or New Testaments. **Interpretation is a central task of faith.**

James Sanders posits two central questions, "Who are we?" "What are we to do?" [15] In order to formulate appropriate responses to these questions the people of God turn to their scriptures. These writings have been understood as a means by which the living God reveals God's self. In his most recent work William Willimon contends that the people of God are distinctive in that they are shaped, formed, and reformed by their encounter with the scriptures. [16]

Some well-intentioned Christians want to claim that their Bible study is "pure Bible study". But this is impossible. We know too much. We are children of the Enlightenment and its critical

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[13] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 70.

[14] For a discussion of midrash as the task of Jews, and by implication Christians as well, see Arthur Waskow, *Godwrestling* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978).

[15] James Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 47.

[16] William H. Willimon, *Shaped by the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 17.

theories and approaches to everything. The question is whether or not we can approach the Bible again with what Paul Ricoeur called "a second naivete". "In every way, something has been lost, irremediably lost: immediacy of belief. But if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can...aim at a second naivete in and through criticism. In short, it is by *interpreting* [italics in original] that we can *hear* again." [17] Very simply stated, there is no Bible without interpretation.[18] We do not violate the Bible when we interpet it. Indeed, we are continuing what has always been done.

Interpretations have varied throughout history. Every major era in history has spawned a distinctive method of biblical interpretation. Even a cursory reading of the history of biblical interpretation must lead a modern reader to a sense of humility. Nothing that a modern interpreter can say will be the final word. Interpretation will go on for as long as there are individuals and communities who read the Bible and attempt to apply the Scriptures to their lives. The Bible has survived many attempts to stifle interpretation. The Bible has survived many attempts to crystalize one interpretation into the only interpretation. Modern readers should be comforted by the fact that the Bible comes to us as canon. Our task as the people of God is to do *midrash*, to interpret life in light of the Bible and God whose will and grace are revealed through the history of Israel and the life of Jesus. A nonchalant ignorance of the Old Testament threatens to restrict the saving acts, the inexorable will, and the utter grace of God from an entire history and a vast range of witnesses.

Unfortunately, most church members are not as self-aware as Willimon's insight suggests. Indeed, issues of identity and mission are not always forged on the anvil of the Bible. Tragically, the Bible has become quite secondary to many faithful people. In part the loss of the Bible from the public mind is the result of the acidities of modernity. The impact of the 18th Century Enlightenment, with its characteristic trust in the human mind, the 19th Century with its emergent critical scholarship, and the present century with its rush towards science and technology have all rendered the Bible as a kind of secondary concern.

Contemporary Christians may never realize the awesome power of God through history. People today run the risk of losing a prophetic understanding of the social and individual responsibilities that are characteristic of the people of God. If careful study of the Old Testament ceases then cardboard figures of a single dimension, usually quite moralistic, will take the place of real people

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[17] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 351. See also Mark I Wallace, *The Second Naivete: Barth, Ricoeur and the New Yale Theology* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer, 1990).

[18] Krister Stendahl in the 1984 Lyman Beecher Lectures, "The Art of Preaching".

who populate the history of Israel. For instance, King Solomon is commonly characterized as wise. However, one can also argue that he was also among the most unwise monarchs in Israel's history. The wisdom demonstrated in the incident of two women claiming the same child [19] seems not to have pervaded the King's thinking. He insisted on large building projects. Internal revolt stirred during his reign.[20] Small wonder that upon Solomon's death a civil war erupted.[21] How could people remain loyal to a government that had so blithely ignored their economic plight? Whoever arranged the books of the Bible in their final form does not seem to have been terribly offended by or concerned about differing perspectives and interpretations.

Church members who ignore the Old Testament may never be able to appreciate the faith of Isaiah during the catastrophic demise of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians. Many Christians are unaware of the struggles Jeremiah endured in order to keep a people from slipping into a superficial optimism as a thin replacement for authentic trust in God. Many Christians cannot understand Psalm 137 since they do not realize the enormous impact of the Exile on Israel's memory. The list of perils that result from ignorance of the Old Testament is practically endless. I am persuaded that when church members are informed about the basic outline of the history of Israel they can participate more actively not only in Bible study but in the work of listening to preaching.

As has been well documented by analysts of culture and education, the public mind has increasingly lost what used to be assumed and shared information. Preachers can no longer assume that the average church member is familiar with the Old Testament. Robert Alter observes, "We no longer live in the age when literate persons had a daily intimacy with the Bible on the basis of shared belief; individuals must now attune themselves to the book, which is today rarely assimilated in early youth." [22] Michael Fishbane contends,

> "We are no longer as we were. No longer are we sustained within a biblical matrix; or at least not solely so, and not without an acute awareness of competing claims on our spiritual and cognitive integrity. The labor of many centuries has expelled us from this edenic womb and its wellsprings of life and knowledge. And so if essayists like Matthew Arnold and poets like Wallace Stevens have billed the poet as the modern day avatar of priest and rabbi, is this not because the Bible has lost its ancient authority to provide moral guidance

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[19] I Kings 3:16-28

[20] I Kings 11:1-43

[21] I Kings 12:1-33

[22] Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, Eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1987), 6.

> and spiritual insight, and to differentiate the sacred and the profane? ...if modern literary critics still struggle with notions of an integrated text and such phrases as "sacred text" or "literary canon" are not these too the cultural afterbirth of notions of a sacred Scripture once believed to be a seamless web of integrated meanings? [23]

In 1973 Elizabeth Achtemeier wrote

> The mainstream of American Protestantism now faces a crisis situation of major proportions. It is in danger of losing its Biblical foundations. It is now possible in this country to carry on the expected work of a Protestant congregation with no reference to the Bible whatsoever. The worship services of the church can be divorced from Biblical models and become the celebration of the congregation's life together and of its more or less vaguely held common beliefs in some god. Folk songs, expressive American culture, can replace the psalms of the church. Art forms and aesthetic experiences can be used a substitutes for communion with God. The preacher's opinions or ethical views can be made replacements for the word from the Biblical text. The Sacraments can be turned into expressions of simply the congregation's fellowship together. But the amazing thing is that no one in the pew on Sunday morning may notice. Indeed, such a worship service may win praise from some quarters as "contemporary" and "relevant". [24]

Though in 1992 the crisis may not be quite so severe as Achtemeier argued two decades earlier, the same criticism is still valid. A great many Protestants have a Bible of extremely limited memory. People draw on favorite verses or a few treasured stories and a vague outline of the life and ministry of Jesus. But insofar as the vast span of the Bible's witness to history, most congregants are appallingly uninformed. Indeed, in a recent article American ignorance of basic Bible facts is underscored: ". . . less than half [of the people surveyed] know who delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Sixty percent of Americans attended church last Easter but a fourth of them didn't know what the occasion signifies. Half of them couldn't name any of the four Gospels of the New Testament. The other half could name at least one."[25] Granted, these are all illustrations of ignorance of the New Testament. However, ignorance is not restricted to one of the Testaments.

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[23] Michael Fishbane, "The Notion of a Sacred Text," *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Indianapolis, Indiana: University Press, 1990), 121.

[24] Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 13.

[25] George W. Cornell, "Religion survey finds knowledge lacking," *The Lima News* (June 15, 1991).

One reason for what I call biblical illiteracy is that the Christian Church has become in practice a contemporary Marcionite Church. Many Christians would concur with the second century heretic who declared that the God of the Old Testament simply couldn't be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The evidence of harsh judgment, warfare, impossible demands and the like are taken as sufficient evidence to show that somehow Jesus' God has supplanted the primitive Old Testament God. In 144 C.E. the Church excommunicated Marcion for his heretical views. One wonders if the contemporary Church could make an equally powerful statement today.

A second reason for Christian biblical illiteracy, especially regarding the Old Testament, is that a large number of Christian readers view the Old Testament as having no substantial relationship to the contemporary life that presses in on them. Perhaps church members have given up on the Old Testament because it seems that the academic institution's highly specialized interest in and study of the Bible has supplanted anything that a common member of a church can do. In any event, there is a need to bridge the gap between pulpit and pew, the seminary and the congregation. [26]

Interestingly, in the Church there seems to be a surge of concern about the Bible. People seem to be demanding more Bible. So contends Emil A. Wcela in his speech, "Who do you say that they are? Reflections on the Biblical Audience Today." [27] Perhaps the demand stems from the poverty of purely academic critical studies, which often seem to be pursued without references to the life of faith from which the scriptures emerged and for which the scriptures are intended. This is essentially the argument in Walter Wink's *The Bible In Human Transformation*. [28] The demand may be the result of a gnawing anxiety that somehow the erosive effects of modern thinking have done sufficient damage and there needs to be recovery of something substantial by which to live. Wcela posits that there is a deep need, a hungering, which has emerged from a religion that has taken its cue from the dominant sociological dynamic identified by Robert Bellah as "expressive individualism." [29] Faithful and earnest church members need faith that is characterized by ". . . fullness of self in the covenant, community, and commitment," which Wcela contends, "defines

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[26] Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, xi.

[27] Emil A. Wcela, "Who do you say that they are?," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (Volume 53, Number 1, January 1991).

[28] Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973).

[29] See Robert Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

biblical faith." [30] For whatever the reason, the climate exists in which a recovery of the Old Testament story for Christians is possible.

This section began with references to the autobiographical nature of theology. Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude with autobiographical reflection as theology's vehicle. The Bible was at one time for me little more than a gift from caring relatives. Over the past 20 years the Bible has become much more to me. I now see it as a Gift from God's own self by which and through which God reveals God's intention, hope, anguish, and patience and ultimate faithfulness. I would like to help the Church discover the sense that the Bible is one of God's Gifts. I think that it is possible that a new sense of community [and identity] can emerge from an encounter with the Bible. Paul Hanson's *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* certainly indicates that possibility. Walter Brueggemann's *The Bible Makes Sense* also makes a powerful argument for the place and importance of the Bible. But these works are not particularly helpful in the actual hard work of getting the Old Testament story into the hands, minds, and imaginations of church members.

The towering question confronting preachers and church members alike is the same question that Isaiah must have asked. Is the enterprise of faithful living doomed to frustration and futility? Or can we assume God will still respond, "...as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth...so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it." [31] Theologically I conclude that God still speaks through the Bible. When God utters a word, when ך ב ך is expressed, then something happens. Thus, I see my task as teaching people a dynamic way to encounter and engage the Bible. This project is designed to equip readers with a method of biblical interpretation that allows them the possibility of discerning what the Word of the Lord is for today.

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[30] Wcela, "Who do you say that they are?" p.7.

[31] Isaiah 55:10-11 *passim.*

Process

My interest in this project began many years ago when I was asked to teach a course on the history of the Old Testament through an adult continuing education program. I discovered that practically no one, church member or non-church member, had even a rudimentary knowledge about Old Testament history. Few members of the church I was serving knew anything more than a handful of scattered facts about the Old Testament.

Over the course of four full-time pastoral appointments the impressions I received of those early incidents and observations remained consistent. Members of United Methodist churches do not have a basic knowledge of the Old Testament or the history of Israel to which the Old Testament gives witness. Therefore, I began considering a means by which to inculcate a basic understanding of the history of Israel in the memory and imagination of a United Methodist church. Unfortunately the lack of knowledge regarding the history of Israel is also apparent within the clergy. One incident in particular illustrates this fact for me. During a pastors' convocation, the well-known biblical scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier contended that clergy should be able to tell the story of the Bible in 20 minutes. A stunned hush fell on the assembly. Achtemeier then proceeded to tell the Bible's story in 20 minutes. What impressed me was not her retelling the story but the vast number of clergy who wrote feverishly attempting to keep up with her outline. The frantic scribbling suggested to me that clergy do not have a basic outline in mind either. The weakness of the church may in this instance be partially attributed to the weakness of its clergy. I decided to attempt a remedy. This doctoral project is the results of that effort.

At the outset, my intent was to create an alternate lectionary for preaching based on the history of Israel. Christian year lectionaries are based on the life of Christ: Advent [Promised Coming], Nativity [Birth], Epiphany, Lent [Death], Easter [Resurrection], Pentecost. In many Christian year lectionaries Old Testament passages have traditionally correspond to the theme dictated by the New Testament pericopes. Such a disjointed approach to the Old Testament promotes the subtle assumption that the Old Testament is useful only insofar as it can be used in specific application to an aspect of Jesus' life, practically ensures no sustained study of the history of the People of God prior to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, and finally that the Old Testament is subservient to the New Testament.

One of the major liabilities of trying to produce an alternative lectionary centered precisely on the dynamic nature of this doctor of ministry program. An alternative lectionary would not necessarily involve the congregation either in design or execution. Moreover, an alternative lectionary and its attendant preaching would not necessarily educate the congregation to see the coherence of the biblical story.

Thus, from the time of its inception to the actual work with associates and other church members, my project changed from an alternative lectionary to an alternative curriculum through which adults would be able to approach the history of Israel. The task of the project now focuses on teaching people how to read and interpret the Bible through the vehicle of the history of Israel.

People challenged me by constantly asking, "What does the history of Israel have to do with me? What difference does this make for a modern-day Christian? Why should I bother with the Old Testament?" These questions forced me to develop a study that is not essentially academic in its approach. Instead, I have tried to formulate a study for adults with major elements that are relevant to circumstances within which modern-day readers must live out their lives of faith.

Another way of phrasing the issue comes from Samuel Johnson, "Nothing so concentrates the mind, as the thought that one is to be hanged in a fortnight." [32] Analogously, nothing so concentrates the attention of the prospective interpreter of the religious classics as a powerful sense of some focused situational experience of a fundamental question of existence - death, trust, anxiety, wonder, loyalty to a cause greater than self, radical contingency, meaningfulness, wonder, joy, love." [33]

Throughout my work as a preacher I have always worked with the question, "What does any biblical text have to do with congregants' lives of faith?" But I felt that I had to learn how to teach people what I do in preparation for preaching and teaching on a regular basis. I have always had an active historical imagination. That is, whenever I read history I envision the settings and forces at work that affect the lives of people. I have found that other readers [teachers and some preachers] frequently assume that people in the past have lived primarily with doctrinal demands, theoretical orientations and the vast sweep of events which have engulfed them as if they were in a whirlpool.

Ever since I began teaching history to high school students twenty four years ago, I have attempted to assist learners to understand that real people populated history. Whether the period we were studying was the French Revolution, the American Civil War or the election of Hitler, I wanted students to realize that men and women have always attempted to live lives of peace in which they can raise their families and enjoy a reasonably decent livelihood. They have attempted to live lives of faith in the midst of a variety of demands placed on them and forces which surround them. Faithful living has always been a matter of tension, ambiguity, risk and courage.

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[32] From James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, Cited in Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 355:25.

[33] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 168.

Throughout my work I have attempted to recapture and represent the realities and experience of people in history. Assisting others how to activate their historical imaginations is a crucial element of this doctoral project.

One might ask whether or not other curricula which can accomplish this same goal already exist. My study of existing curricula indicates that most fall into one of four basic categories:

1. Standard introductions to the literature of the Old Testament, see for instance *A Guide Through the Old Testament,* or *Mastering Old Testament Facts,* three volumes.
2. Histories of Israel
3. Verse by verse commentary type workbooks, see for instance the six year series Genesis To Revelation [United Methodist Publishing House]
4. Thematic treatments, see for instance the International Sunday School Lessons for Christian Teaching, or the Shalom or Kerygma series.

An Analysis of the International Lesson Series

By way of illustration here is a thematic analysis of the International Lesson Series. Many adult classes rely on the standard International Sunday School Lessons for Christian Teaching. A rapid perusal of the outline of material appearing in a twelve year cycle 1986-1998 illustrates the dearth of sustained Old Testament study. [34]

Topic	Date
Hosea	March - May, 1987
Beginning of a Covenant People [Old Testament Survey]	September - November, 1987
Moses and his mission [Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy]	June - August, 1988
Creation is a Continuing Event [Genesis]	September - November, 1988
Conquest and Challenge [Joshua, Judges, Ruth]	June - August, 1989
Through Suffering to Hope [Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah]	September - November, 1989
Wisdom as a way of life	June - August, 1990

[34] *Uniform Series 1990-1991*, "Cycle of 1986-1992", Uniform Series, "Cycle of 1992-1998" Prepared by the Committee on the Uniform Series, Marvin Simmers, Chairperson (New York: National Council of Churches, 1987).

[Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Psalms James]	September - November, 1990
Visions of God's rule [Ezekiel, Daniel, I, II Thessalonians, Revelation]	June - August, 1991
After the Exile [Ezra, Nehemiah, appropriate prophets]	September - November, 1991
Prophets, Priests, and Kings [conflicts and concerns]	December - February 1991-1992
Songs and Prayers of the Bible [Song of Songs, Psalms The Magnificat]	March - May, 1992
God's judgment and mercy [neglected minor prophets]	September - November, 1993
Old Testament personalities	June - August, 1994
God Redeems a People [Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy]	
The Story of Beginnings [Old Testament Survey] [Genesis]	September - November, 1994
A nation turns to God [I, II Kings; Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah]	June - August, 1995
From the Conquest to the Kingdom [Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, I Kings]	September - November, 1995
God's Promise of Deliverance [Isaiah] God's love for all people	December - February, 1995-1996
God with us [Psalms]	June - August, 1996
God's people face judgment [II Kings, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Habakkuk]	September - November, 1997
Wisdom for living [Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job]	June - August, 1998
God leads a people home [Nehemiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah,	September - November, 1998

Malachi]

The lessons in the International Lesson series do not follow a chronological sequence. At only two points do adults receive an outline of the history of Israel [September - November, 1987; September - November, 1993]. Moreover, the lessons are presented in the standard format of verses to be read, pertinent background information, and applications suggested by writers.

Interpretive Assumptions

This project is based on the following assumptions:

1. Scriptures began as attempts by faithful people to interpret their experience.
2. Traditions, stories from the oral tradition were preserved through writing.
3. Written work was preserved, organized into what became known as Scripture.
4. Interpretation remains the central task which Scripture performs, and to which faithful are called.
5. Imaginative engagement with the text is a legitimate aspect of interpretation.
6. Within every text there are dynamics, eg. tension, polarity, positions requiring decisions of some kind.
7. Typical Protestant propositional interpretation, i.e. stating articles of faith and requiring intellectual assent, should be kept to a minimum.
8. Identification: Meaning is shaped by the placement of one's self and one's hearers in the dynamics of the text. [35] However, readers should not necessarily identify solely with heroic aspects of biblical characters. The characters of the Bible were just as human as modern readers. This principle assumes a major role in my project.
9. Faithfulness consists not so much in selecting the right interpretation as in engaging the text.

These assumptions are in part derived from the hermeneutical principles presented in *Preaching Biblically*.[36]

Thompson suggests the following

1. Simplicity: The starting point for biblical interpretation is the clear, plain meaning of the passage. Readers should avoid allegory and eisegesis or reading into the passage something that isn't there. Any reading of the Scriptures must take different literary techniques seriously.
2. Intentionality: God intends the Bible to communicate his [sic] creative and redemptive purposes in Jesus Christ. Thompson insists on asking the single most fundamental question: Why is this text

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[35] see James Sanders *God has a Story Too* regarding the lack of moral heroes in Bible.

[36] William Thompson, *Preaching Biblically* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), especially ch. iii "The Process of interpretation" pp.39ff

there? The exegetical task is to pose questions from different perspectives, for instance "What would have happened if the congregation acted on this writing? What caused the writer to write? What would have happened had Paul not forgotten what was in the past, but remained haunted by past failures, knowing full well that those same failures would arise again? One of Thompson's insights that has proven particularly helpful is that the answer to these questions will come out either theology or ethics.

Another helpful insight is that, according to what Thompson calls the "new hermeneutic", the text interprets us.

3. Correspondence: The basic interpretative purpose involves correspondence between the biblical and the contemporary worlds. James Sanders uses the phrase "dynamic analogy".[37] Other words have been used to describe the correspondence between the two worlds: correlation, historical continuity, similarity, identification, transference, parallelism, linkage, analogy, resemblance, paradigm, and comparability.

4. Polarity: In every biblical passage, opposing forces are moving against each other. Among others these forces include: counter forces, contrast, dialogue and memory.

5. Contextuality: This rubric is probably among the best known among modern readers. The historical critical method assumes that knowledge of a biblical passage's context or contexts enhances its meaning. Standard concerns of this approach include historical factors, political forces at work, concerns for what is going on in the text near the assigned/chosen passage, theological presuppositions in the text and cultural mores.

6. Genre: The literary form of the text influences its interpretation.

7. Language: Knowledge of the role and use of language facilitates the discernment of meaning.

8. Multiplicity of meanings: A text may yield a variety of meanings. This principle underlies the approach that I have developed.

9. Perspective: The Bible is a witness to the saving activity of God. For Christians the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection affects the interpretation of every passage. This saving action, however, takes on different emphases. For instance, some interpretations will provide support for readers' current understandings. A prophetic hermeneutic, on the other hand, challenges readers. Both support and challenge are appropriate perspectives.

Clearly every one of these interpretive principles cannot be applied to every narrative included in this project. They are listed here as illustrations of the variety of ways through which I have attempted to lead adults in their reading, study, and interpretation of the Bible.

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[37] James Sanders, *God Has A Story Too: Sermons in Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) 20.

Imaginative Engagement With the Bible

The project developed in this program is a thirteen session adult study after the following outline with the working titles in quotes.

1. Genesis 1-11	"The Moral Backdrop"
2. Genesis 12-50	"Ancestors"
3. Exodus	"From slavery to freedom"
4. Numbers	"Wanderings"
5. Joshua	"Investment in the land"
6. Judges	"Tales of the Tribal League"
7. I-II Samuel	"Israel demands a king"
8. I-II Kings	"Monarchy"
9. Prophets	"Speaking Truth to Power"
10. Prophets	"Social Conscience"
11. Prophets	"God's Judgment in history"
12. Prophets	"Exile"
13. Ezra-Nehemiah	"Return and Restoration"

These working titles were admittedly "academic" in nature. However, they served to organize the program in its formative stages. Additionally, the questions which serve as focal points of each study session attempt to evoke reflection and discussion on a dilemma or challenge that confronts practically all adult readers. I have employed the term "universal" to describe the dilemma.

The outline which finally emerged is as follows:

1. Genesis 1-11 From the Moral Backdrop
   "Should there be limits to our investigation and experimentation?"
   universal: dilemma of technological advances counterbalanced by ethical concerns

2. Genesis 12-50 From the era of the Patriarchs
   "The rhythm of faith and unfaith"
   universal: everyone has moments of high faith as well as utter failure

3. Exodus From the period of Exodus
   "How does God summon people to God's service?"
   universal: people ask whether or not God still seeks men and women for mission
   does God use historical circumstances to evoke ministry?

4. Exodus and Numbers From the period of the Wandering
   "The promise and peril of freedom"
   universal: the dilemma of living with personal and corporate responsibility

5. Joshua From the period of the Conquest
   "The allure of false gods"
   universal: the dilemma of the appeal of lesser loyalties and the demands of biblical faith

6. Judges From the era of the Tribal League
"Are vows always binding?"
universal: the dilemma of promises and vows

7. I and II Samuel From the era of the Monarchy
"To which authority will we listen?"
universal: dilemma of having to answer to different authorities

8. I and II Kings From the era of the Monarchy: Prophets I
"How is God present with us?"
universal: people may experience and interpret the presence of God in many ways

9. I and II Kings From Israel's history: Prophets II
"Royal Prerogative versus Prophetic Conscience"
universal: prophetic conscience of social justice - how can it be manifested today?

10. I and II Kings From Israel's history: Prophets III
"Is history God's workshop?"
universal: Can we still claim that God is sovereign over history?

11. Jeremiah From Judah's history: Prophets IV
"To whom shall we listen?"
universal: the dilemma of having to decide who we will obey

12. Psalms From the Exile
"What can happen in worship?"
universal: many people wonder what the purpose of church is
subtle question, "What experiences are we allowed to voice in church?"

13. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Ruth From the Return and Restoration
"How do we know who we are?"
universal: a restatement of the ethical dilemma of identity

I have chosen to use a chronological outline of the history of Israel as the organizing principle for this project. Whenever I teach the Old Testament adult students always ask for characters, events, and developments to be placed in context. That is, people ask for the dates when events occurred or the time during which individuals lived. Just as it makes a difference when studying the life of Abraham Lincoln to know that the American Civil War erupted as he began his presidency so it makes a difference to know that when Solomon died a civil war erupted and the nation of Israel was irretrievably ruptured. Additionally, when readers have a sense of the flow of Old Testament history more sophisticated insights can be drawn. For instance, the Deuteronomic interpretation of Israel's history was written during the Exile. Advanced students of the Bible can conceptualize what this means. However, readers who have absolutely no knowledge of the events surrounding the collapse of Israel in the 8th Century or Judah in the 6th Century, the subsequent desperation of dispersal and exile, cannot imagine the theological shock of the violation of the

land and the Temple. Nor can readers ignorant of the time periods of Israel's history place writing and events in their appropriate time periods.

Let me illustrate. Many novice readers cannot imagine why Deuteronomy claims to be about the time of Moses and yet was written at a different time. When a student has a copy of the time line then the demise of Judah and exile of the people can be seen. When students then learn that a book that purportedly deals with an ancient period was actually written subsequent to the events it narrates they can see the relative position of the writer's theological reflection. Similarly, many of the prophets' work is dated according to the kings. If readers have the time line in mind then the prophets' work can easily be located in the flow of Israel's history. For instance, when Isaiah speaks regarding Assyria, "Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger the staff of my fury..."[38] a reader can locate the onslaught of the Assyrians in the appropriate section of Israel's history.

I have found that most students appreciate learning the time line chronology of Old Testament history. Thematic treatments often overlook or take for granted the flow of Old Testament history. I do not assume that readers will learn the basic outline of the history of the Old Testament without specific study of the chronology. By the time participants complete this thirteen session curriculum they will know that the period of the Judges precedes the monarchy, during the monarchy the prophets emerged, and that Israel and Judah each suffered similar disasters. Moreover, participants should be able to envision the relative time in Old Testament history when events and developments occurred.

The history of Israel chronological chart that I have developed serves as the central organizing principle. Each of the thirteen sections that I have designated in that history served as an arena in which a question of universal significance emerged. Bible study customarily includes current theological or ethical thinking. The approach that I have developed begins with imaginative reading and study of the biblical text. A dilemma has been identified for each of the periods of Old Testament history. This approach accomplishes the following. First, it confirms the Bible, including the Old Testament, as a central resource for Christian faith. It involves members with a part of the Bible that is frequently ignored. It also implies that the Old Testament is an appropriate starting place for ethical and theological reflection. Finally, this approach serves to illustrate the relevancy of the Scriptures for contemporary Christians.

Initially this project was intended to be thoroughly open ended and inductive. That is, participants were to enter into the biblical text imaginatively and from that imaginative engagement identify the issues at stake, forces at work, choices that are possible, and the demands of faith that impinge on characters and nations. However, it became quite clear that in fact as a

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[38] Isaiah 10:5

teacher and writer I had already identified what were in my judgment salient themes, topics, dilemmas and tensions to which the text points. Frustration occurred when readers were unable to perceive the point to which I was directing the study session. From this I learned that this project and approach is not quite so inductive in its written form as it may appear at first. I realized that a theme or issue would have to be stated at the outset. The inductive technique would be at work in the course of interpretation and not the designation of the subject or topic.

This does not preclude participants discerning different issues or topics in the same text. When participants have learned the technique of historical imagination and interpretation then they have the skills to discern topics independently. Clearly any study guide or curriculum cannot be exhaustive.

One of the major difficulties I encountered over the course of designing this project is the limitation of time and space. Only one topic or theme, one set of demands and choices, or one character can be studied in an hour's class time. But in any given era of Israel's history there are many more opportunities than a session's time allows for. Therefore, this curriculum / project is best understood as an introduction to a technique rather than a full-blown introduction to Old Testament studies. It differs from a standard introduction to the history of Israel or the Old Testament.

Customarily, histories of Israel include vast amounts of information which seems remarkably immaterial to most lay readers of the Bible. When I introduce too much information in presentations participants often interject questions such as, "What difference does this make?" However, the antidote is not to ignore the facts of history altogether. That would be tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bath water. A certain amount of history is necessary in order to understand the Old Testament. Introductions to Old Testament studies often take lay readers into the depths of critical scholarship long before they are prepared to delineate distinctions between traditions, documentary theories and so on. Again, however, adults should not be prevented from learning about the historical-critical method and the insights that can emerge from that kind of study.

This curriculum integrates many different disciplines:[39]

1. Old Testament history
2. Hermeneutics
3. Imagination
4. Reader Response Criticism

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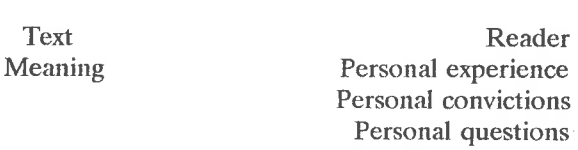
[39] A full discussion of how each of these components occurs in the curriculum is found in the introduction to the curriculum itself.

Reader response is a method of literary criticism. Essentially, reader response criticism is based on the notion that meaning in texts is not restricted to what the author intended at the time of writing. Instead, meaning is discerned by every reader as the reader encounters the writing. Two illustrations will make the point clearly.

Figure 1

Figure 2



In figure 1 the reader attempts to ascertain what the writer meant when the piece was originally written. The meaning is self-contained in the piece. The reader's responsibility is to read what the author meant. In figure 2, the reader not only ascertains what the writer may have had in mind, but also, because the reader does not approach any text from within a vacuum, the meaning of a text also depends on the reader's own interpretation. Following these illustrations, classic historical-critical scholarship follows figure 1. That is, the writer meant to say something quite specific to a specified individual or community. What that writer had to say was in large measure affected by societal, economic, political, and theological forces, presuppositions and assumptions. In my project, reader response criticism does not reject the findings of historical-critical scholarship. However, the meaning of any biblical text is not restricted solely to what can be ascertained through the historical-critical method of study.[40]

Some readers may be concerned that if meaning is determined by the reader then we are in peril of losing the text altogether. Frankly, given the experience of independent Bible study groups that have assumed independence from seminary trained ministers, this has been a concern of mine for quite some time. However, the few incidents of violence towards both text and interpretation have not destroyed the Bible. My experience has been that when I have attempted to protect the Bible from potential misappropriation or misinterpretation participation in Bible study falls off sharply. The more I worked with the approach which I developed through this project, the more participation (both in numbers and enthusiasm) increased. The Bible has been Bible for a long time. The canon has withstood many an interpretive effort. The Bible will survive reader response as well.

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[40] For a fuller discussion of reader response criticism see Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1978) and *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1974).

I recruited three groups of people, with representation from the four groups of people in the congregation, as participants in the development of this project. These three groups included representation of each element of the congregation: single persons, married couples, college-educated, non college educated, professional and blue collar workers.

The first group was the *Context Associates* who were charged with dual responsibilities. First, this group performed the function of an experimental group within which the new approach to Bible study I wanted to develop would be attempted. This undertaking would by its nature be challenging since the project's design had not yet evolved. The Context Associates were surprised to learn that I had not developed the curriculum prior to contacting them. They were pleasantly surprised to learn that they really were to play a significant role in developing the curriculum. Initially, the group found it very difficult to believe that I hadn't already developed an idea into finished form. They couldn't believe that I really did need their assistance with this project. Second, this group performed the function of a support group during the months of experimentation and development. The second groups were two ongoing mid-week Bible study groups.

Our first meeting together established the ground rules and framework for our year's work. A letter of invitation had indicated the expectations. Duplicated materials from the United Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry Handbook were included with a cover letter. [1]

The first meeting of the Context Associates reviewed the group's responsibilities and commitments of time. Then, based on their experience with me as a teacher in Sunday School and mid-week Bible study, I asked them to characterize my teaching. I learned very quickly that this group would be quite candid.

Their characterizations and observations included the following. I use the lecture method primarily. While this method transmits large amounts of information quickly the group contended that the method was minimally helpful in actually getting them into a study of Israel's history and the Old Testament. Also, the lecture method can be especially threatening to people who are not familiar with academic settings. I also work interactively with participants in order to develop points. Frequently they noted that I used question and answer in order to prompt involvement. They saw hope in moving towards involvement with each person in class. One criticism, however, was that occasionally I tend to focus on one or two people who carry the conversation or who have appeared to be particularly interested in the topic. A weakness in my teaching was that when people don't seem to be interested I had the propensity to follow the desires of the class if only to continue the conversation. This seemed as if it were at the expense of the content that I had planned for the class. A strength to which the group pointed was that I was not afraid of admitting that there were times when I didn't know an answer. They appreciated the fact that I

was willing to say I did not know but would look it up for the next meeting. They noted my extensive use of a chalk board.

I then asked the group to characterize the level of sophistication of my teaching. Again I found that the group responded very candidly. My teaching is always challenging and sometimes way over their heads. Coincidentally my level of learning and enthusiasm sometimes overwhelmed the class. The group also explained that as the teacher I seemed to know where the class was supposed to be going with the session but that the participants were not always certain. This uncertainty created a sense of anxiety. Many participants want to have a very clear sense of the objective for the class session. Since I have attempted to work inductively some participants objected to the fact that presentations do not always move from point "a" to point "b". When I asked questions that didn't seem to lead towards a specific conclusion participants objected since they want to have an inkling about what is most important. The apparently random method of questioning frustrated many people, especially those who were accustomed to following a teacher through a didactic lesson. Not surprisingly the group also noted that I was not always patient with what may appear to me to be trivial things.

From this extended conversation questions emerged.

1. Can a project be developed that will speak to everyone who participates?
2. Will participants have to attend every session for the project to be coherent?
3. Will this project work in this congregation?
4. What is the goal for the learner in this project?
5. Can I learn a teaching technique that actively includes learners?

Subsequent meetings centered on four basic components of the project (Time line, engaging the text imaginatively, discerning the faith issues, and learning how to wrestle with dilemmas, tensions, and questions that impinge on modern readers).

In order to achieve a uniform approach and one which could be followed easily the following four components are in each session.

Setting the Story in Context

Knowing the Story

Interpreting the Story

Applying the Story

It is possible to approach a text with no predetermined theme or question in mind. However, for the purposes of group study and the development of this curriculum I found that it was very helpful to have identified the theme or question ahead of time. A designated text was identified. I found that a group is more comfortable when the dilemma is already identified. Initially, I had hoped that the group could delineate issues and implications that emerge from their reading of the

text. However, I found that in most instances the suggested issues and dilemmas were simply too varied. Occasionally the groups would find themselves struggling to achieve consensus regarding the issue or the focus of the hour's discussion. However, we learned that after a group had been working together for a long period of time it developed the skill of identifying salient points and focus relatively quickly.

The question/theme/dilemma was then written on the board. Participants in all three groups affirmed the importance of locating the incident/character/or narrative on the Time Line. I then briefly described the essentials of the historical background necessary to set the drama in place. This material formed the content of the step called "Setting the Story in Context".

Following these procedures participants then began to engage the Scripture with a minimum of input by me as the teacher. Unless the text were particularly lengthy the group found that an oral reading of the text was very helpful. The group discovered that interpretation begins with the act of reading. Though the tasks of reading aloud and outlining the incidents may seem too time consuming they serve extremely important functions. The Scriptures retain central importance. The group hears the narrative or incident differently through oral interpretation. Invariably a significant detail, a subtle emotion, or previously unobserved action will be noted. Moreover, when the text was read orally the group noticed details and nuances that were not readily apparent to individuals reading silently to themselves.

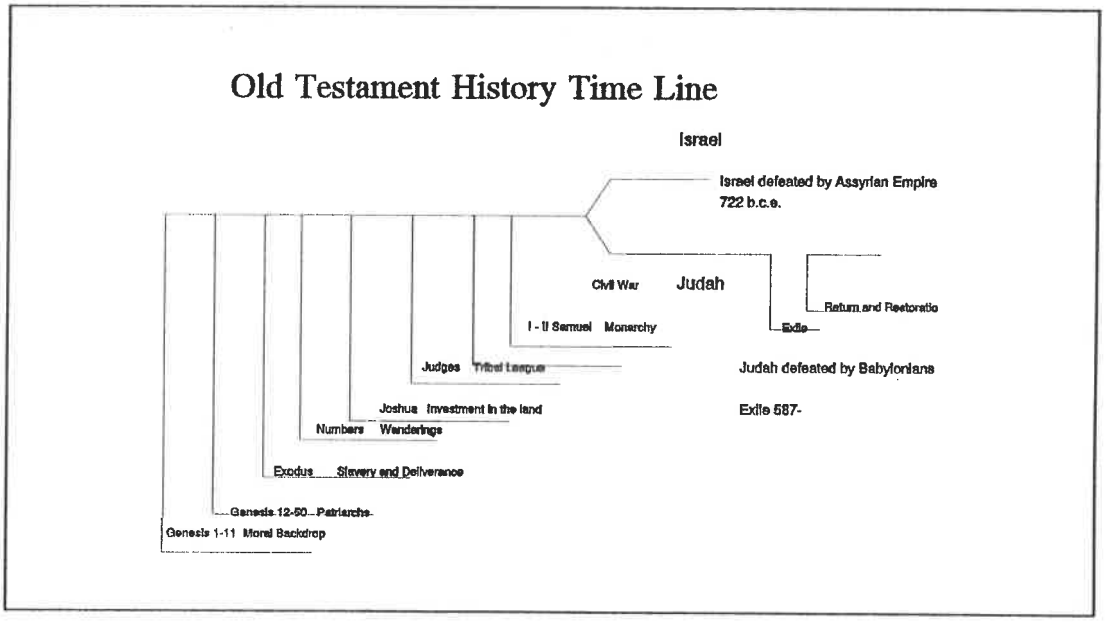
A component of this approach that participants determined was particularly helpful and suggestive was indicating their initial response to the text. Participants in all three groups discovered that every reader had some kind of initial response to a biblical text. Responses were by no means uniform. I made a point to list responses on the board as they were stated. Since participants were being asked to do something they had never done before, that is, to respond to the Bible without worrying about what was right, wrong, or acceptable, it was absolutely crucial that their responses were treated respectfully. Every response was listed. Participants responses played a very important role in engaging the text. Some of the responses to biblical texts included resistance, questions, difficulties, emotional responses, and indications of comfort or discomfort.

In each of the three groups with which I worked someone invariably asked, "Why bother with responses or reactions to a biblical text?" Some participants felt as if their responses or reactions were of little significance. They seemed anxious to get on with discovering what they were supposed to learn from the Bible.

At this point I should underscore the importance of the process of interpretation as a legitimate function of the Church. The Church has always served as the primary context within which the

Bible is interpreted. [41] Readers were then asked to outline the narrative. On first blush this may sound very academic. However, all three groups with which I worked discovered that with a few minutes attention to the scenes, shifts in location, dramatic developments and flow of the incident insights begin to emerge.

The Time Line



The Time Line assists study in the following ways:

1. Provides an outline of Israel's history that can be seen at a single glance
2. Provides quick reference for placing the incident in Israel's history
3. Since the outline is included in each session's work, reinforces learning the flow of Israel's history.

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[41] The Church performs the role of "an interpreting community" and thus defines the parameters of interpretation as well as preserving the text. For a full discussion see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980) especially chapter 13, "Is there a text in this class?" pp. 303-321.

The Curriculum

This chapter includes the heart of this doctoral project, the Old Testament adult study curriculum. Some material included herein will duplicate what has already been articulated in the previous explanatory and descriptive material. Keep in mind that the curriculum cannot contain all of the previously stated rationale. Instead, the curriculum must be able to stand on its own and be used independent of explanatory documentation.

Introduction

This project is a thirteen session curriculum for adults for the study of the Old Testament. The outline of the study is the chronological history of Israel from the earliest beginnings through the tragic exile and subsequent restoration of Jerusalem. Some readers may wonder why anyone would want to study the Old Testament at all, much less study the Old Testament on the basis of an outline of history. Others may ask bluntly, what possible meaning can that ancient time have for contemporary Christians?

The debate over the study of history will continue indefinitely, whether over the history of Israel or even the history of our own nation. Commentator Bill Moyers noted that, "...lack of historical continuity and communication between generations is...one of the most disquieting features of our time." He cites Czeslaw Milosz' comments upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980, "Our planet that gets smaller every year, with its fantastic proliferation of mass media, it is witnessing a process that escapes definition, characterized by a refusal to remember." [42] Others may counter by suggesting that remembering a national past may lead to less than fortunate results. Did not the Nazi Party evoke memory of history? The results of that distorted memory led to tragic exaggerations of prejudice, bigotry and oppression. Is it not possible that national memory may serve purposes of arrogant posturing? Indeed, the risks of distortion and misappropriation of memory are always present. However, being aware of the danger is a part of its prevention.

Equally as important as the danger of memory is the peril of a loss of memory. One only has to look at the recent history of Europe to see the dangers of forgetting that Christians are not the only people of God. Long before Jesus of Nazareth appeared in Galilee or was crucified in Jerusalem the People of God were Hebrews wandering through a wilderness, later struggling to survive in the face of onslaught by expanding empires, suffering through banishment from their

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[42] Bill Moyers, "History Still Matters" *American Heritage*, December 1985, p.81. See also Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1987).

own land. The People of God have always had to retain their distinctive identity amidst hostile surroundings. Far too many Christians are unaware of the significance of the history of Israel prior to Jesus of Nazareth.

The Old Testament is a part of the long story of God's dealing with the people of God. In the Old Testament period the people of God are called Hebrews, Israel, Judah, and Jews. In the New Testament period the people of God are for the first time also called Christians. The recollection of God's relationship is preserved in narrative, prophecy, poetry and wisdom. It would be impossible to understand the New Testament without some knowledge of the Old Testament. A complete discussion of the importance of the Old Testament for Christians exceeds the space and time available here. Two questions will serve to illustrate the issue. For instance, how could "the hopes and dreams of all the years" be met in the events of First Century Judea? What were the hopes and dreams, national aspirations and memories of First Century Jews under the domination of an occupation government? Another illustration comes from the disciples' own witness. When Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" they answer "Some say you are a prophet, others think you're Elijah." What possible meaning can these identifications have if not from the perspective of a tradition on which people have drawn? Be assured that this study is not a dry-as-dust explanation of the importance of the Old Testament nor a listing of all the Old Testament references that are found in the New Testament. That is to say, this curriculum is not intended as an academic exercise designed for scholars. Instead, this work is designed to give adults methods by which they can begin reading the Old Testament imaginatively and creatively.

One of the central instructions in the Christian faith is "remember", in Greek *anamnesis*. Far too many Christians suffer from *amnesia*, the inability or refusal to remember. The results of amnesia, loss of history, are tragic indeed. Unfortunately the genius of George Santayana's insight has been tarnished by the phrase becoming trivialized. But his insight still holds true, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." History is replete with illustrations of what happens when Christians forget their authentic Old Testament roots and heritage. Anti-Semitism emerges periodically and tragically. The Holocaust years 1933-1945 illustrate the peril of forgetfulness.

But rather than attempt to prove or disprove the importance of history, which would render this project irrelevant for all but a knot of interested historians, this project uses the history of Israel as a vehicle through which participants may engage the Old Testament scriptures in lively conversation. At issue are two fundamental questions.

First, Who am I? The second question follows, What am I to do? [43] This study assumes that participants are a part of the Christian church. But church membership does not answer the first question unequivocally. In fact, persons who are in the Christian church are constantly reflecting on what it means to be one of God's people. Social issues demand response; economic disruptions require response; issues of prejudice and bigotry evoke sympathy and care all of which are manifestations of the second question, "As the people of God what are we to do?" These same two questions have been asked by every generation of God's people. Whether the generation was that of the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness or facing certain defeat at the hands of Babylonian forces the questions "Who are we?" and "What are we to do?" were equally as important.

The same questions challenged Jesus of Nazareth. Two of the Gospels [Matthew and Luke] include scenes of Jesus asking these same fundamental questions. What else are the temptation narratives if they are not illustrations that even Jesus had to wrestle with basic questions of identity and ethics? What has always intrigued me is that the only Bible that Jesus would have been able to read was his Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. From his study of the Scriptures he took his identity and focused his ministry.

The earliest Christians understood themselves to be the extension of the people of God. The New Testament Christian movement did not reject its Old Testament roots. In fact, when a movement attempting to remove the Old Testament from the Bible did emerge, the Marcionite movement, the Christian Church declared that effort to be heresy.

Therefore, this study will use thirteen episodes from the Old Testament as means by which to ask fundamental questions that have been common to every generation of God's people. The questions and issues raised in this series of studies are deliberately ambiguous. That is, the answers to these questions and issues will always be moot, debatable. The task of faithful living does not focus on the right answers so much as it does on wrestling with the right questions and in the attempt to live life faithfully. Therefore the issues and questions raised will illustrate differences of perspective, evoke tensions, reveal polarities in opinion, disturb comfortable assumptions, which is as it should be with authentic Bible study. A careful reading of practically any biblical text reveals tension, ambiguity, differences in perspective and risks involved in decisions of faith.

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[43] James A. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) 47.

Assumptions [44]

1. The Scriptures did not appear suddenly as finished, written pieces. Instead the stories of the faith, the faithful, and the not-so faithful began precisely as stories through which the people of God wrestled with their own identity and faith. Eventually stories, narratives, poems, prophecies and proverbs were preserved as written documents. The following schematic diagram illustrates the emergence of scripture:

1. Event - - -
2. Stories/memories -- - - [what scholars call the oral tradition]
3. Written reflections- - -
4. Preserved documents
5. Organized corpus of written works - -
6. Canon [Bible]

All further work in this study is predicated by and built upon this dynamic understanding of how the Bible came to be. Indeed, whatever doctrine is held regarding the inspiration of scripture determines how the scripture is used. [45]

The sequence that I have posited has implications for current study. If modern readers are willing to embrace the notion that ancient people wrestled with issues that in some sense are the same issues that we contend with then we can appreciate the dynamic of wrestling with the received tradition.

2. A central task of the people of God is the interpretation of Scripture. Some readers may disagree. Surely there are other tasks which may be central to being the people of God. Surely an argument can be made that attempting to correct social evil, working towards justice, striving for elimination of war, and trying to eliminate the scourge of starvation are legitimate tasks for God's people. Granted, they are. However, each of those efforts is in itself a dynamic interpretation of what the Scriptures instruct/imply/tell us what we are, as God's people, to do. In short, our ethical behavior is in itself an interpretation of Scripture. Some denominations declare that "it makes a difference what you believe." The import of this statement of course is that correct doctrine is necessary for one's salvation and membership in that denomination. However, the truth of the assertion is also a keen ethical insight. What we believe will in fact dictate what we do. Doctrine leads to behavior.

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[44] The assumptions on which this curriculum is based have already been stated in a previous section of this paper. However, since the project is supposed to be able to stand on its own those assumptions are restated here.

[45] Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1948), 36.

The Bible has always been and remains a central component of faithful living. However, the Bible is not a modern document. Even the most recent writings of the New Testament are removed from our time by nearly 2,000 years. Therefore, the Bible must be interpreted in order to be appropriated for modern living. The following schematic diagram illustrates how the Scriptures, being part of a tradition that the people of God have in their identity, have been interpreted.

The **People of God**	**Historical Era**
Identity	Demand of Events
Tradition	Moral demands
Scripture	Economic Circumstances
Altar [Worship]	National / International events

From the Convergence of these two
The **Word of the Lord** for that day/era/time

These dynamic understandings of the how the Word of the Lord emerges and of how the Word is determined in a subsequent era are the dynamics within which modern readers must interpret their Bibles. 3. The interpretation of the Bible has a long and fascinating history filled with the adventure of historical discovery, keen insights as well as peculiar and destructive interpretations. As recently as the last century in the United States for instance, the Bible was used by some people to justify the despicable institution of slavery.

Jewish interpretation has centered around four possibilities. *Peshat* [פְּשַׁט] deals with the literal meaning of the text. This approach assumes a kind of independence from any interpretation at all. It simply asks, "What does the text say?" Remez [רֶמֶז] is the allegorical approach. This approach allows the reader/interpreter to assign meanings to the text without asking further questions of the text's intrinsic meaning. Deresh [דָּרַשׁ] is the interpretation of the text for its moral teaching or importance. Sod [סוֹד] is the realm of interpretation of mysticism or hidden meanings.

Christian interpretation too has taken a variety of approaches. Modern readers may be familiar with the terms "lower or textual" criticism which has to do with making certain that the actual text is as accurate as possible. "Higher criticism" is the term used to describe the tools of critical study that have been applied to the scriptures. For generations biblical scholars have attempted to determine who wrote the various documents that are in the Bible. Scholars have spent lifetimes discerning the historical, economic, political, social, military, religious and philosophical forces that swirled around each of the writers of pieces of the Bible. The historical-critical approach seems to imply that the Bible can only be understood when all of the surrounding forces and events are clearly understood. Other interpreters have attempted to ignore the historical critical questions of

scholars and simply asked, "What does the Bible say?" in a literal approach. More recent interpretive techniques include form criticism, redaction criticism, source criticism and more recently, the study of biblical narrative and story telling.

This short summary illustrates that interpretation does not necessarily begin with memorized doctrinal affirmations or assertions about the Bible. One further word must be said. Some readers may have encountered modern Christians who claim a "pure Bible study" which implies no doctrine, no interpretation, "just what the Bible says." However, our discussion suggests that a literal reading of what the Bible says is indeed a variation of interpretation. Quite simply stated, there is no Bible without interpretation. [46]

These thirteen sessions will provide means by which modern readers may enter into the task of interpretation through imaginative reading and recognition of ourselves in the biblical drama. To some extent this study is a response to the fact that all too frequently Protestant Christians read the Bible as if it were a set of propositions about God that must be memorized. For some readers the Bible has been rendered into little more than a manual of remedies for specific difficulties. Moreover, in addition to serving as a kind of corrective, this study is written for people who want to think critically about their faith, commitments they have made in the name of Christ, about the nature and purposes of God, and who are concerned about the place of critical thinking in the life of faith. This study also assumes that the final word, the final interpretation and the final decisions of faith have not yet been made.

This study assumes that the ancient words still have authority for modern Christian readers; however, not as concrete or systematized answer-giving authority. Rather, this study assumes that the Spirit of God which was at work during the moments surrounding the original events which evoked the first writings is the same Spirit that is at work today. As ancient communities of faith found the words of Scripture to contain insight, instruction, interpretation and inspiration, so can modern communities of faith, e.g. the Church.

4. Whenever we read the Scriptures we encounter a world that is different from our own. In other words, there is distance between modern readers and the ancient text. We are well advised to respect this distance. If we respect the distance then we will be less inclined to seize the Bible for our own purposes at the expense of hearing a fresh word of the Lord or learning a new insight.

Ironically many Christians who hold strongly to the authority of the Scriptures for their lives cannot allow for the fact that the Scriptures emerged from worlds quite different from our modern world. Granted, the Scriptures have authority for modern Christian living. However, the nature

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[46] Krister Stendahl, The Lyman Beecher Lectures. Yale Divinity School, 1984.

of that authority is hardly a quick index of ethical imperatives or a kind of "what to do when, thumb indexed yellow pages." Even as modern people approach the Scriptures the Scriptures approach us, interpret us, make demands on us. One only need read a brief history of the interpretation of the Bible to see that every age has had characteristic approaches to interpreting the Bible. Few historical eras give evidence of understanding that its particular approach has been historically and socially influenced. Therefore, many interpreters have claimed absolute authority when in fact their interpretation has been contingent on time and surroundings.

I have made this assertion not for the purpose of debunking previous interpreters or to point to ignorance of earlier ages. Indeed not. The point is that every age, every era has cultural expectations and historical forces that affect how men and women approach the Scriptures.

5. Every story, narrative, poem, or prophetic oracle will carry within it a tension, polarity, or position that challenges our own preconceptions and interpretations of human experience and faithful life.

Faithfulness does not end with the recognition of this tension. Faithful living begins with this recognition. In every instance a decision of some kind will be required. This study assumes that there is not a single decision which is appropriate for everyone or every setting.

6. Faithfulness consists not so much with making the single right choice as it does with wrestling with the claims of God on our lives, our thinking, our behavior, our ethics, our prejudices and preferences as we sense God's claims through the Scriptures. This study does not conclude with the statement, "I think." Much more to the point of biblical faith this study presses towards, "Because I sense God's will I must..."

The Approach

The approach is best described as *inductive* or *discovery*. The Bible is not the sole possession of the professional guild member. Unfortunately, many Christians have never learned how to read the Bible imaginatively. Far too many Christians have been instructed only to find specific verses that substantiate what a preacher or teacher contends. The approach of this project invites readers to engage biblical stories through imagination. Participants are not expected to memorize a series of facts, though facts will be included. Participants are not expected to emerge from each session with a single doctrinal affirmation. Each session has a theme around which the study centers. The specific question certainly is not the only possible issue. Readers may develop their own questions or issue for further study. These themes and questions are common to all persons. Being human and being the people of God has always been challenging and difficult. Choices are

not always obvious. Obvious choices are not always easy. Indeed, faithful living is fraught with tension and ambiguity. Faithful living always requires courage and community.

Therefore, one of the purposes of this study is to give readers a means by which to wrestle with the demands of faith as through reading the Old Testament imaginatively. Imagination includes:

- imaging location, sites, sights, sounds, eg. physical surroundings, as well as what real people looked like during real periods of history. For instance during the collapse of Jerusalem a vivid imagination can envision frightened men huddling behind city wall parapets, in the distance clouds of dust from massing armies; the sounds of scuffling feet as women and children flee to the shelters
- emotions of fear, anger, frustration, anxiety, compassion, love
- asking the basic question "What are the choices that can be made here?"

With historical imagination modern readers may begin to ask "What are the authentic options that real people, not just biblical characters, face? What is at stake for the nation?"

The teaching task is to keep at these perceptions and conceptual questions long enough that learners can then sense similar impulses. Indeed, the statement of what people see and feel, what they understand as the options are in fact subtle expressions of comprehension. The teacher can assist by pointing this out.

Imaginative, inductive, or discovery approaches to Bible study have been developed. Hans-Ruedi Weber's *Experiments With Bible Study* is very good. However, his volume does not address the chronological outline of Israel's history. Oletta Wald has developed an inductive approach as well.[47] Walter Wink employs a similar approach. His approach keys on the emotions, psychological dynamics, and circumstances of the modern reader. The biblical text itself is sometimes treated in secondary fashion. In short, the liability of Wink's approach is that the text can easily get lost.

Components

Certain **components** will be found in every session.

I. **Setting the Story in Context** The context in Israel's history is established by placing the event on the schematic outline of Old Testament history. The schematic chronology of Old Testament history should be displayed. The same chart appears at the beginning of every chapter. This chart will be on a sturdy paper that can be posted. It serves as the skeleton outline for the course. The schematic outline assists students in the following ways:

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[47] Oletta Wald, *The Joy of Discovery In Bible Study* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975). See also *The Joy of Teaching Discovery Bible Study* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975).

- Students can see the relationship between eras in Israel's history. Among the common complaints voiced in many Bible study groups is that the teacher needs to realize that participants don't know much about the Bible generally not to mention the history of the Old Testament in particular. Therefore, since many Christians want to know about the history around which the Old Testament is written, the chart is provided.

- Students can see where the events in each chapter fit within the context of Israel's history. A visual guide helps to order material that for many is simply unmanageable facts with no comprehensible pattern or form.

II. **Knowing the Story or Text** There are many ways to engage in Bible study.

a. One method is to outline the chapter. The advantage of this method is that it serves to reinforce the reader's memory as well as afford time in which the story or incident can be reconsidered carefully. This outline does not have to be an exhaustive one nor does it have to follow a strict format. Instead, a simple listing of scenes, characters involved, incidents reported, and flow of the narrative are listed.

b. After the event has been placed in its appropriate chronological sequence a brief summary of the history surrounding the event is given. A concise outline of the book from which the passage under consideration has been taken may give students sufficient information on which to base the session's discussion. Again, this element is intended to get the story of God's people into the memory of the Church.

c. A specific passage will be read aloud. The old Scottish preacher's admonition is well heeded, "Give them a big gob of scripture in case the preaching gets thin." Equally important to the Scottish preacher's counsel is the need to keep students in the Scriptures. Many students are tempted to rush on to the commentary or to the preacher's expert opinion.

This curriculum assumes that the Scriptures are available to all readers, not merely the experts. The history of the Bible illustrates clearly that many generations of men and women have worked long and hard so that the Bible will be available for the lay person to read. There have been historical eras in which the scriptures were not available to anyone except scholars who could read and translate Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. In addition to the language barrier being eliminated, there is also a sense in which the interpretation of the Bible is also the task and privilege of every person, not just the experts, scholars, academic professors and preachers. Granted, there are a number of men and women who have given their life's energies to studies of the Scriptures. It would be foolish to overlook or ignore the contributions of generations of scholarship and commentary altogether. It is equally as shortsighted to overlook the necessity for every reader to come to terms with the Scriptures in a personal way.

Students may wish to rush on to interpretation and application. However, there is no substitute for time with the text. Careful reading reveals subtleties that are easily missed in rapid reading. Moreover, the Spirit of God has its own timing. Theological reflection requires time.

d. Another method is to have readers indicate responses to the text. Everyone has emotions. Therefore, it is appropriate to ask, "What do you feel as you read this passage?"
Are there any emotions implied in the text itself?

e. Another cue may be the tone of the text. Is the text hortatory? cautioning? criticizing? scolding? bracing? angry? sad? judging?

f. Occasionally listing passages or words that seem to be particularly important, strong, significant, or otherwise important assists in getting into the text. When people loosen up and begin to see that they do have a valid sense of what the scriptures are doing then they can get involved imaginatively.

g. Frequently questions about the historical setting, the factors that influenced the writing or the moment, who the writer is emerge spontaneously from the group. At this point I frequently have to list questions or issues as a kind of side panel- to acknowledge them and to save them for later discussion.

A word should be added about the teacher's role and class process. The outline of the chapter or passage under consideration is a relatively straightforward undertaking. The responses and selection of important words or elements is very subjective. The teacher and students need to understand that the point of this section of the work is an active, imaginative engagement in the text **without concern for what the right answers may be**. The point is to get people involved in the reading instead of waiting passively for a teacher or preacher to tell them what they should learn or know about this passage or event.

I have found that imagination is particularly important at the point of getting into the text. Here is the place in the lesson where I always attempt to engage readers in the drama of the text. If, for instance, the text is Psalm 137, from the Exile, I have often asked groups to wonder aloud what kinds of emotions fill the hearts of refugees. Practically everyone has seen television pictures of desperate people seeking safety, or parents anxiously looking for their children. Some participants have been fortunate enough to work with refugees and have been allowed into the inner sanctum of emotion and fear. In other instances I have asked for people to reconstruct a scene with themselves in the middle of it. One of my favorite reconstructions is the ploy by Pilate to force the crowd into making the decision as to which man, Jesus or Barabbas, will be executed. For readers who would like to see how a very fine Christian novelist accomplishes this strategy see

Frederick Buechner *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Comedy, Tragedy and Fairy Tale.* [48] George Arthur Buttrick once said that, "all other things being equal the better preacher will always be the one who has and uses the gift of imagination."[49] Our teaching can always be improved upon by developing more vivid imagination.

III. **Interpreting the Story or Text**. By this time in the session students have already begun investing themselves in imaginative reading. Emotions have been stirred and expressed, questions have begun to emerge. Participants have often already begun to make the hermeneutic leap to their current circumstance or to modern-day application. However, the movement to appropriation should not yet be made. More work on the text needs to be done. The question now is, "What is at stake here?" What issues seem to be at stake for the people in the story? Other questions may also prove helpful. What alternatives seem to present themselves to the people? Which of the alternatives does the writer seem to favor? Do major characters seem to prefer one of the alternatives? What is the majority opinion? What is the minority opinion?

Since participants have been investing themselves in the text for quite some time to this point, they have already probably tentatively indicated their understanding of what the implications are for contemporary readers, for themselves and for their church.

IV. **Applying the Story or Text** Each session includes variations on the following questions. What contemporary assumptions about church membership does this scripture challenge? What modern comforts does this text confront? What are the modern-day parallels to the Old Testament stress? What contemporary attitudes towards our culture and society does this text contradict? What do you find in this text that challenges your faith?

The discussion is deliberately left open. Students are not supposed to reach consensus. Instead, the point of the study and discussion has been to engage the text imaginatively and initiate interpretation of the Bible. The groups with whom I have worked appreciate the process of arriving at application to their circumstance and/or our time.

At the end of each session participants will have (1) learned where an incident happens relative to the expanse of Old Testament history (2) examined an incident / event in the Old Testament, (2) experimented with responses to the event / text, (3) wrestled with possible interpretations of the passages or events and, (4) considered the challenges, confrontations, demands that are being

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[48] Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Comedy, Tragedy and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

[49] Cited by Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988) 20-21.

made by God on them in their current lives of faith, and reaffirmed their hope that God has been at work in history and remains working in the present.

The approach developed in this project keeps the biblical text at the center of the discussion without making the Bible the only word spoken. Participants must realize that the Bible preceded their reading. Granted, readers will bring interpretation to the text as well as be challenged or interpreted by the text. But by working as diligently as they have with the text itself participants are reminded that after all has been said and done there is still a Bible, there is still the canon which we must continue to take seriously.

This approach depends upon participants who will enter into a section of scripture without demanding that the scripture prove a certain theological point or illustrate a moral truth. The incidents and pericopes that have been selected for this study pose questions and dilemmas which defy simple analysis and facile conclusions. Propositional doctrines do not resolve the tensions of faith that every individual feels in a real crisis. This study and approach can best be done when participants allow their present horizons to be vexed, provoked, challenged by the claim to attention of the text itself [50] That is, participants will have to refuse the ordinary attempts to distance themselves from any claim [of the text] that cannot be controlled. [51] Inasmuch as possible each session attempts to address a dilemma that remains consistently demanding throughout human experience. The Bible never attempts to sentimentalize the harsh realities of human experience. This curriculum is written on the premise that participants do not want to sentimentalize the reality of harsh, demanding, healing love, does not shrink from moments of confrontation, conflict, argument, nor demand agreement demanded by serious conversation on the fundamental questions of existence. [52]

Each class session is designed to take approximately one hour.

This curriculum was designed in the context of three groups of church members willing to engage in developing and refining a different approach to Bible study. This approach, however, is not restricted to group use. Directions are written deliberately avoiding specific application. That is, individuals may use this technique as well as teachers with groups of people. However, discussion always leads to insights and perspectives that individuals working alone may not see.

One further comment is appropriate. Each session offers one primary approach to each text or set of texts. By no means should the single approach be considered the only possible tack that can

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[50] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, p.105

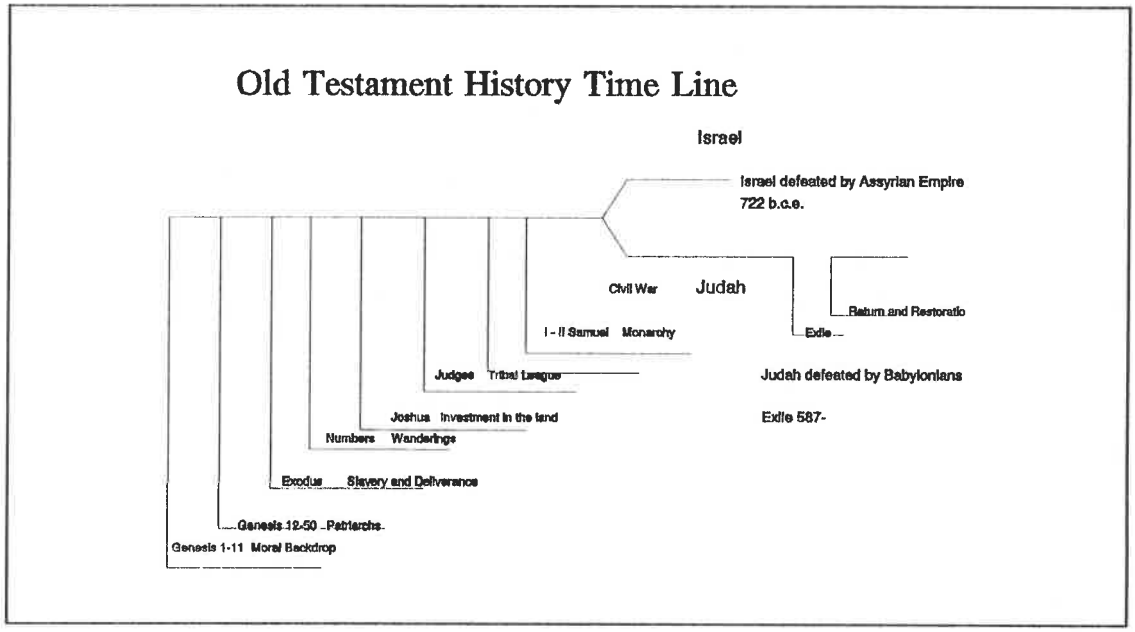
[51] *Ibid.* 194.

[52] *Ibid.* 447.

be taken. Many different approaches are possible. For the purposes of this curriculum, for the purposes of clarity and focus, I have opted not to include vast amounts of academic discussion or scholarly debate regarding the texts.

Session 1 An Incident from Genesis 1-11
The Moral Backdrop
"Who sets limits of experimentation, discovery and invention?"

This session introduces you to the first eleven chapters of Genesis.



Setting the Story in Context

For many readers the first eleven chapters of Genesis are among the most problematic chapters in the entire Bible. Many an argument has been waged over the meaning of the creation stories, the creation of human beings, and the Flood. For the purposes of this study, Genesis 1-11 will be understood as stories which establish what can be called the "moral backdrop" against which the drama of the rest of the Bible takes place.

Apparently the writer and the people who read these stories thousands of years ago were not plagued by the kinds of scientific questions that often cripple modern readers. They were concerned about the nature of God, the will of God and the manner in which people should live as a part of God's creation. When modern readers approach these chapters, they can approach them as short dramas which encapsulate a portion of what it means to be human. These chapters, like all other chapters in the Bible, are concerned with what God's interest is in each of the settings and dilemmas confronting human beings.

Here is a list of the major events in Genesis chapters 1-11:

1:1-2:4a	Creation
2:4b-2:24	Creation and creation of human beings
3:1-24	The first evidence of sinfulness: rebellion - Adam and Eve
4:1-26	The second evidence of sinfulness: violence - Cain and Abel
6:5-8:22	The third evidence of sinfulness: wanton depravity - Noah and the Flood
11:1-9	The fourth evidence of sinfulness: apostasy - the Tower of Babel

This session will focus on a dilemma that emerges from incidents in the idyllic Garden and surrounding the construction of a Tower. In Genesis 3:22-24 the Lord grants almost unlimited freedom to the human being. Only one restriction is applied. In Genesis 11:1-9 the dilemma of unfettered possibility again encounters limits imposed by the Lord.

Knowing the Story

Note where the events to which these chapters refer occur on the Time Line.

Read Genesis 3:22-23 and 11:1-9 aloud. As the stories are read make note of the verses or scenes which strike them as being most significant or troublesome.

An outline of Genesis 11:1-9 may look like this:

Scene 1
- the entire earth with one language
- the people decide to build a city and a tower

Scene 2
- The Lord comes down to see what had been built
- The Lord's response
  - observes the achievements of human technology
  - comments on the apparently limitless creative capacities of human beings
  - the Lord decides to render language asunder
- The Lord's action
  - speech is rendered incomprehensible
  - people are scattered throughout the earth

Scene 3
- The tower is called Babel

Interpreting the Story

List the similarities that participants see in the incidents in Genesis 3:22-24 and Genesis 11:1-9.

suggestions might include:
the human being seems capable of more than is appropriate to do
the Lord seems concerned about what potential there is in human exploration
the Lord has the power to limit human possibilities

Note the tone of the Lord's speaking.

What is the tone in Genesis 3:22-24?

[suggestions]:
the Lord sounds remorseful
now the human being will realize how difficult it is to be God

What is the tone in Genesis 11:1-9?

[suggestions]
the Lord sounds very concerned
perhaps the people of the earth have lost their sense of the need for God

Here are some possible paths towards interpretation:

1. The notion of not being allowed to remain in Paradise has something to do with the human being now knowing the difference between good and bad

2. The notion of having different languages may have something to do with individuals and nations wishing to make names for themselves without reference to God the creator.

Applying the Story

Begin by listing ways in which participants have benefited from achievements in science and technology. List these on the right side of a board or newsprint. Suggestions might include modern day surgery, anesthesia, eye-glasses, internal combustion engine, rapid transit, cooking conveniences.

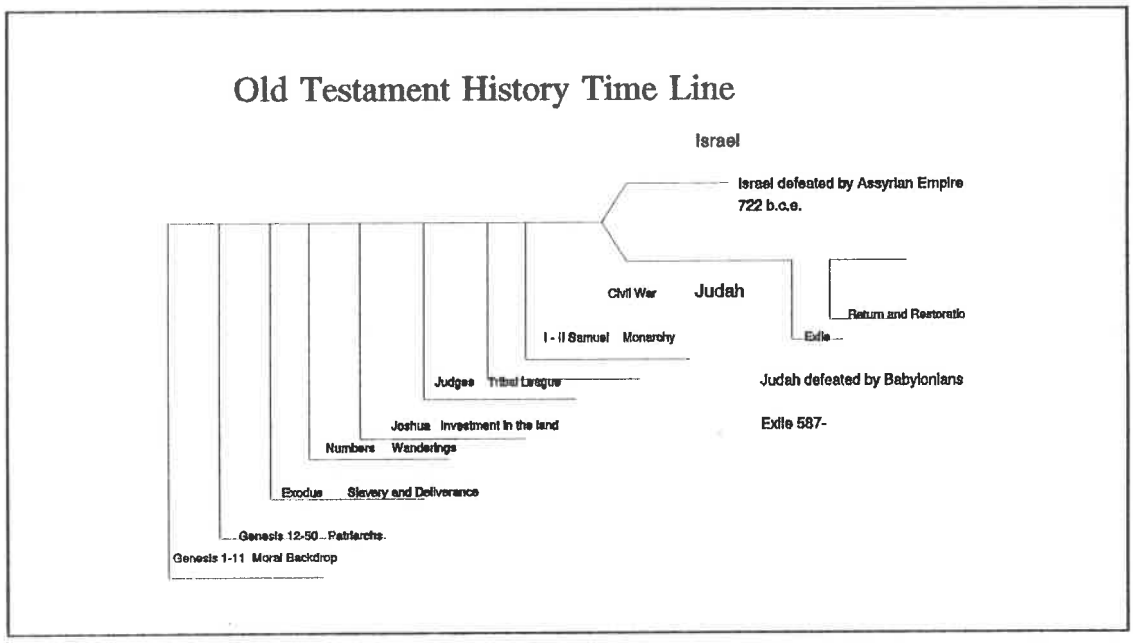
Refer back to the list of ways in which participants have benefited by science and technology. Then ask, "Why would the Lord want to limit what the human race could accomplish?" "What does it mean to suggest that God has entrusted the capacity of discerning good and bad to the human race?"

Session 2 Genesis 12-50
An Incident from the Period of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs
"Faith and Unfaith"

This session focuses on the period of our Ancestors in the faith. There are four major patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

For many Christians, one of the most troubling aspects of the Bible is the fact that major biblical characters have been presented in Sunday School as if they were single-dimensional heroes and heroines of the faith. Indeed, the New Testament has a passage where major characters are portrayed in just such a manner.[53] But when the stories of the people are read carefully those same heroic figures prove at times to be scoundrels, cheats, oppressors, or dismal failures. Does the fact that heroes and heroines failed mean that we should ignore them altogether? Does it mean that we are simply debunking ancient people? What can a modern reader learn from ancient stories that present men and women who alternated between moments of high faith and abject failure?

This session will center on a pattern that is common to practically every biblical character, the rhythm of faith and unfaith.[54]



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[53] See Hebrews 11:1-12

[54] The insight on which this session is based was first stated by B. Davie Napier in *From Faith to Faith: Essays on Old Testament Literature* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), chapter II "Legend: Covenant with the Fathers Genesis 12-50", pp.60-107.

Setting the Story in Context

Chapters 12-50 in Genesis narrate the stories of the four major ancestors. Here is an outline of those stories with their major sections.

Abraham	Genesis 12:1-25:18
God calls Abraham	Genesis 12:1-9
Sarah in jeopardy	Genesis 12:10-13:1
	[see also Genesis 20:1-18; 26:1-11]
The birth of Ishmael	Genesis 16:1-16
Sodom and Gomorrah	Genesis 18:16-19:19:30
God tests Abraham	Genesis 22:1-19
Abraham dies	Genesis 25:1-18
Isaac	Genesis 21:1-35:29
The birth of Isaac	Genesis 21:1
The binding of Isaac	Genesis 22:1-19
Isaac marries Rebekah	Genesis 24:1-67
Stories about Isaac	Genesis 26:1-34
Jacob	Genesis 25:21-49:33
Jacob cheats his brother Esau out of the birthright	Genesis 27:1-45
Jacob flees to Bethel	Genesis 27:46-28:22
Jacob and Laban	Genesis 29:1-31:55
Jacob is reconciled with his brother Esau	Genesis 32:1-33:20
Joseph Genesis 37:1-36; 39:1-50:26	
Joseph and his brothers	Genesis 37:1-36
Joseph's success, temptation, and imprisonment	Genesis 39:1-23
Joseph interprets dreams	Genesis 40:1-23
Joseph elevated to position of high authority	Genesis 41:1-57
Famine strikes the land	Genesis 42:1-38
Joseph's brothers must journey to Egypt	
Joseph's brothers' journey to Egypt a second time	Genesis 43:1-38
Joseph tests his brothers	Genesis 44:1-34
Joseph reveals himself to his brothers	Genesis 45:1-28
Jacob migrates to Egypt	Genesis 46:1-34

Knowing the Story

Read Genesis 12:1-9. As the story is read list on the board or newsprint the verses which illustrate Abraham's faith.

Responses might include:

:4 "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him..."

:7 "So he built there an altar to the Lord..."

:8 "From there he moved on..."

:9 "...Abram journeyed on by stages..."

Now read Genesis 12:10-20. As this story is read list those moments that illustrate Abraham's lack of faith, or faithlessness. Note that the incident of Abraham conspiring with Sarah in response to the apparent threat of death is repeated in chapters 20:1-18; 26:1-11. The repetition of the incident does not necessarily mean that the event occurred three times. Instead, the repetition serves to underscore the significance of the event.

Responses might include:
:11 Abraham is scared of what might happen
:12 Abraham colludes with Sarah to lie

Interpreting the Story

Apparently the narrator is not as concerned about the lie and conspiracy as he is about something else. What is that something else?

List on the board or newsprint what participants expect God to do in response to Abraham's apparent lack of faith.

Responses might include:
God will get angry
God will punish people who lie, won't He?
God might look for another man and woman to trust, I don't know what God will do.

What is the tone of the narrative? Does the narrator seem upset or angry about Abraham's duplicity? Does the narrator spend much time with what modern readers would call a white lie? What is God's response to the circumstance that threatens Abraham and Sarah? Evidently the biblical writer is more concerned with the faithfulness of God than the unfaithfulness of Abraham. Does this mean that biblical faith will sometimes be strong and at other times weaken and waver? What does this series of narratives have to say about God's grace?

Applying the story

The tension in the story is that the two major characters, Abram and Sarai, had at one point manifested very strong faith in God. But in another circumstance, when they felt threatened, they evidence lack of faith.

Make note of moments when you felt strong faith. Then, in a parallel column, list those moments when you felt as if you had failed miserably. During which of these times did you find yourself hoping that God would be gracious and compassionate? When did you find it most difficult to believe that God would remain faithful to you or the church?

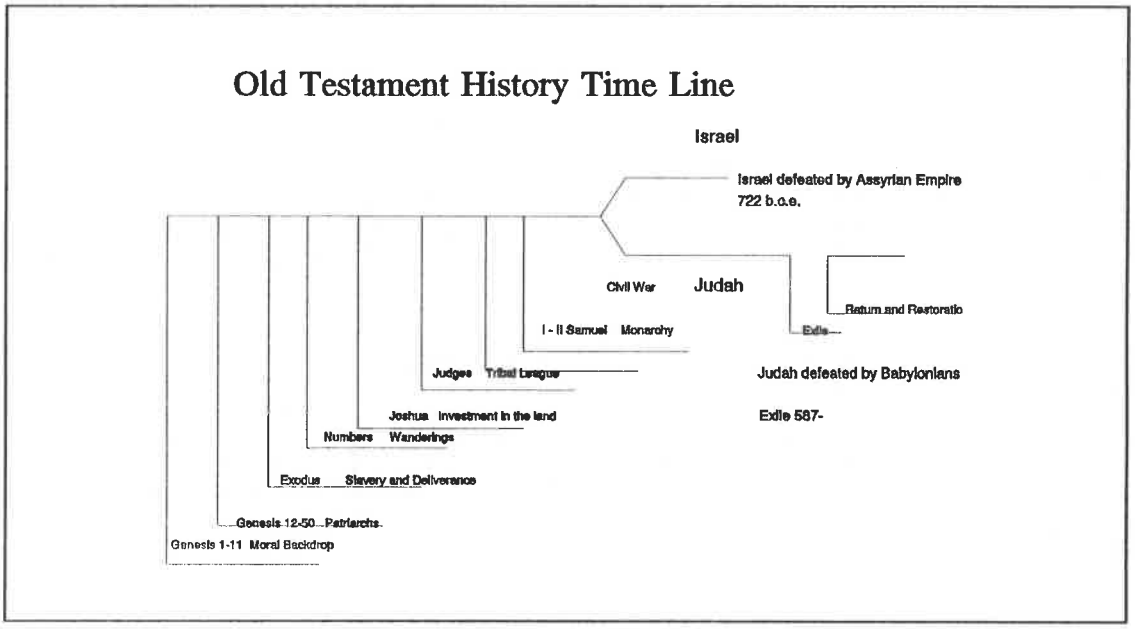
We may be less convinced of God's grace than either Abraham or Sarah since we feel it necessary to bleach out their failure. Some readers may feel that focusing on their failure and accepting it merely paves the way for bland acceptance of moral turpitude on the part of modern Christians.

Some readers will insist on bleaching out the shadow of failure. But the Bible insists on retaining the evidence of failure.

Why would the biblical writer include "shadow side" collusion, mistrust, and failures in stories about major characters?

Session 3 Incidents from the Exodus
"When God summons to service"

This session focuses on events during the Exodus. After Joseph and his family settled in Egypt the Pharaoh who had employed Joseph died. Another Pharaoh acceded to the throne. This Pharaoh did not know Joseph nor did he trust the Hebrews. Therefore, since the Hebrews represented threat to the Pharaoh they were enslaved. Israel's slavery in Egypt lasted 400 years. Exodus 1:1-22 briefly summarizes these years.



Setting the Story in Context

The Book of Exodus focuses on God's gracious intervention on behalf of God's people. Towards the conclusion of the Hebrews' period of slavery God hears their groans (Exodus 2:24) and initiates saving actions. The story of Moses is a part of the larger story of God's saving action.

Knowing the Story

Read Exodus 2:1-15 and Exodus 2:23-3:12. The two stories narrate the progress of Moses' life. As you read the two stories note how God is involved. Specifically, note the active presence of God in the narrative of the burning bush. God's name is not mentioned in the narrative describing Moses recognizing the Hebrews as his people.

The outlines might look something like this:

Exodus 2:1-15

2:1-4	*Moses born and then set adrift*
2:5-10	*Moses rescued by Pharaoh's daughter*
2:11-14	*Moses senses his true identity Intercedes on behalf of a Hebrew*
2:14-15	*Moses flees*

Exodus 2:23-3:12

2:23-25	*God sees and hears the Hebrews' plight*
3:1-6	*Moses sees the burning bush*
3:7-12	*God summons Moses to God's work*

Interpreting the Story

Note that in Exodus 2:1-15 Moses gives no indication that he knows who God is or what God's will is. Nor does the narrator give any indication how Moses comes to understand his identity as Hebrew.

How did Moses know that his heritage was Israelite?

Evidently something about the treatment of a slave upset Moses.

In Exodus 3:7-15 Moses hears the voice of the Lord from the burning bush that is not consumed. The technical word that describes the appearance of God is *theophany*.

At this point Moses does not yet know the Lord's name. In fact, Moses has to ask what name he should use when people ask him who called to him.

Applying the Story

Begin your reflection by listing your understanding of the ways that God summons people into God's work.

Some readers will immediately recall biblical incidents of Moses and the burning bush [this narrative]. *Other incidents include:*

Jeremiah as a young boy [Jeremiah 1:4-12]
Isaiah in the Temple [Isaiah 6:1-9]
Gideon in the threshing bin [Judges 6:11-40]
Paul on his way to Damascus [Acts 9:1-22; 22:4-16; 26:9-18]

Other suggestions might include:

a sense of call, people just feel as if they have to do something
a minister invites them to consider ministry
people might see a specific need and want to do something about it
during a preaching revival meeting when an invitation was given.

By now readers should be noting that when there is work to be done individuals can be apprehended by God. However, not all summons to God's work are spectacular or identifiable on first blush as summons at all. Perhaps God used Moses because he saw in Moses certain characteristics that could be used effectively in God's work. Do we have to be of specific ethnic group to have compassion for that group?

Look again at the list of ways in which people feel summoned to God's work. Are there any new insights that you wish to list now?

Conclude this session by discussing/considering the impulses you or others in the group sense regarding what should be done on behalf of others. What kinds of work come to mind? What does the summons of God to work towards God's intention look like?

Which of the two summons to the Lord's work do you prefer? What is the reason for your preference? Which of the two narratives is more akin to your personal experience?

Another alternative

Here is an alternative approach which readers may find helpful. Though the story of Moses' call is familiar, the reluctance of Moses to heed the summons may not be familiar.

Knowing the story

Read Exodus 3:7-15; 4:1-17. Note how Moses responds to the summons of God.

3:11	who am I that I should go?
3:13	what shall I tell the people when they ask what your name is?
4:1	but the people won't believe me
4:10	but I'm not eloquent
4:13	send someone else

As you read the story make a note to yourself about what you anticipated God's response might be to Moses' reluctance. Did you anticipate anger? impatience? patience? chastisement?

How would you characterize God's response to the many tentative refusals that Moses offers?

Interpreting the story

In your estimation did Moses have any choice but to follow God's leading? Could Moses have said "no" often enough that God would find someone else?

Why would the people who assembled all the stories of the Bible include the narrative of Moses' multiple refusals to accept the instruction of God? Moses is portrayed as resisting the Lord's imperative four times by asking a question. The fifth time Moses comes right out and asks for the Lord to send someone else!

When the people God heard and told the stories of the ancient heroes and heroines of the faith they saw their own stories in the stories of the ancestors. [55] Israel was never particularly comfortable with the summons to a distinctive life in the midst of raging international alliances and competing empires. The notion of following a completely different orientation regarding power, authority, national and personal identity felt very threatening. In short, for all of Israel's and Judah's history a tension always existed between the impulse to flee far from the summons of God and the impulse to follow the summons of God. Thus, in Moses (as well as every other character in the Old Testament as well) Israel and Judah saw their history played out in miniature.

Applying the story

Modern readers may not be able to identify with a man who saw a bush strangely burning while at the same time not being consumed. However, modern readers can certainly identify with reluctant heroes and heroines. Doubtless there are many Christians who have read the Bible and felt the impulse, "I ought to be doing something." In short, people have felt a summons into God's work. But they felt threatened by the demand, uncomfortable with the notion of doing something that stands apart from the crowd, or disquieted by the fact that their lives may be disrupted.

The question that many readers may have to ask is, "How does God continue responding to reluctant people?"

A related question may be, "What is the significance of remonstrance with God as a part of authentic faith?"

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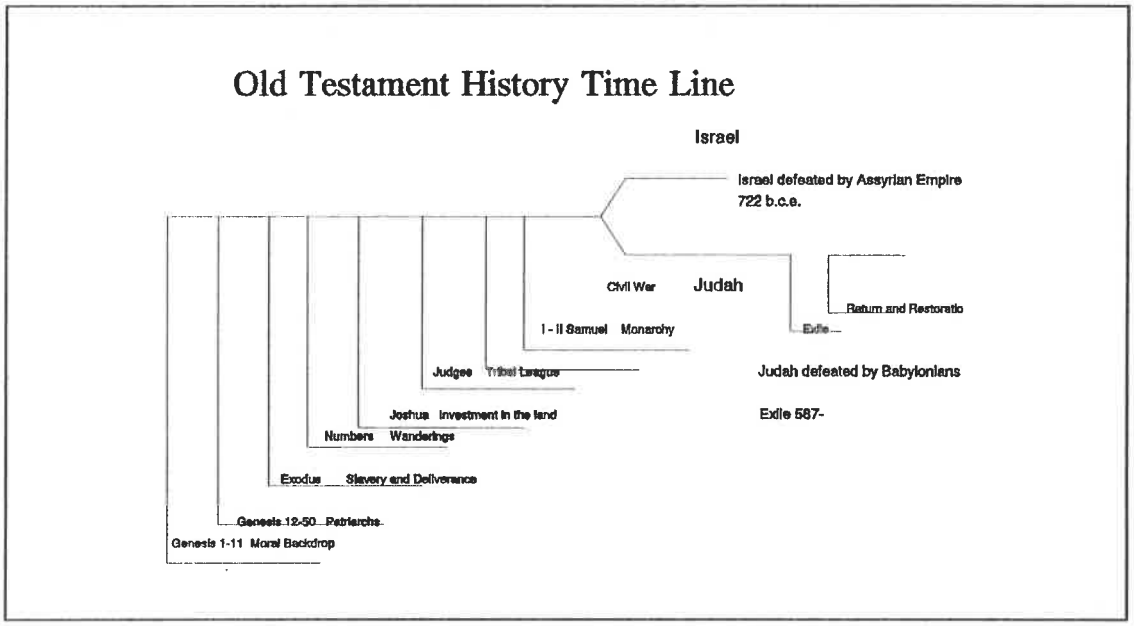
[55] B. Davie Napier, *From Faith To Faith: Essays on Old Testament Literature* (New York: Harper, 1955), p.61.

Session 4 Exodus and Numbers
An incident from the period of the Wanderings
"The blessing and burden of freedom"

This session will center on a critical events that take place in the wilderness.



Setting the Story in Context

Following the escape from Egypt and the miraculous event at the sea, the people of God found themselves in a forbidding wilderness. How would they survive in a new environment? More importantly, how would the people handle their new-found freedom?

The theme of murmuring occurs many times in the Old Testament [56] For the purposes of this session we will focus on the incidents narrated in Exodus 15:22-16:36 and Numbers 11:1-35.

Knowing the Story

Read Exodus 16:1-36.
Outline the story indicating the points where the Lord acts in response to the people's demands.
responses might include:

16:4	*The Lord promises assistance*
16:12	*The Lord reiterates the promise*
16:13-14	*The promise is fulfilled: quail and manna*
16:21	*The Lord repeats the assistance daily*
16:35	*The people are assisted for 40 years*

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[56] see Exodus 16:2-3; 17:3; 32:1-4, 25; Numbers 11:4-6; 12:1-2; 14:2-3; 16:13-14; 20:2-13; 21:4-5.

Then read Numbers 11:1-35.
Outline this story indicating the points where God acts in response to the demands of the people.

responses might include:

11:1	*The Lord's anger is kindled and fire erupts on the outskirts of camp*
11:10	*The Lord's anger blazes hotly*
11:16	*The Lord gives instruction to Moses*
11:33	*The Lord causes a terrible sickness to afflict the people*

Interpreting the Stories

These narratives provide us with what an apparent contradiction. The two stories, though similar in theme, are not the same. Note where are the stories similar? Where do they differ?

Similarities	Differences

The two narratives are two different interpretations of similar events. In each instance the people murmur against Moses. They object to the circumstances of their new-found freedom that threaten them and their families.

Applying the Stories

List what you consider to be the blessings and burdens of freedom. List them in two columns. Your list may begin with something like this:

Blessing	*Burden*
Freedom allows us to make our own choices	*We must live with the consequences of our behavior*

Modern readers may not have to be concerned about food in the wilderness. However, we do have to wrestle with the burdens and responsibilities of freedom.
Which of our demands do you think God will respect and fulfill willingly?
Which of our demands and expectations do you suspect God will not fulfill willingly?
Are our expectations of comfort and surplus in accordance with biblical faith and experience?

An Alternative

The stories of murmuring in the wilderness are about the people of God whom God had only recently saved from certain death. Readers may want to reflect on the implications of the fact that the saved people of God are precisely the people who murmur. This may surprise or disturb some readers.

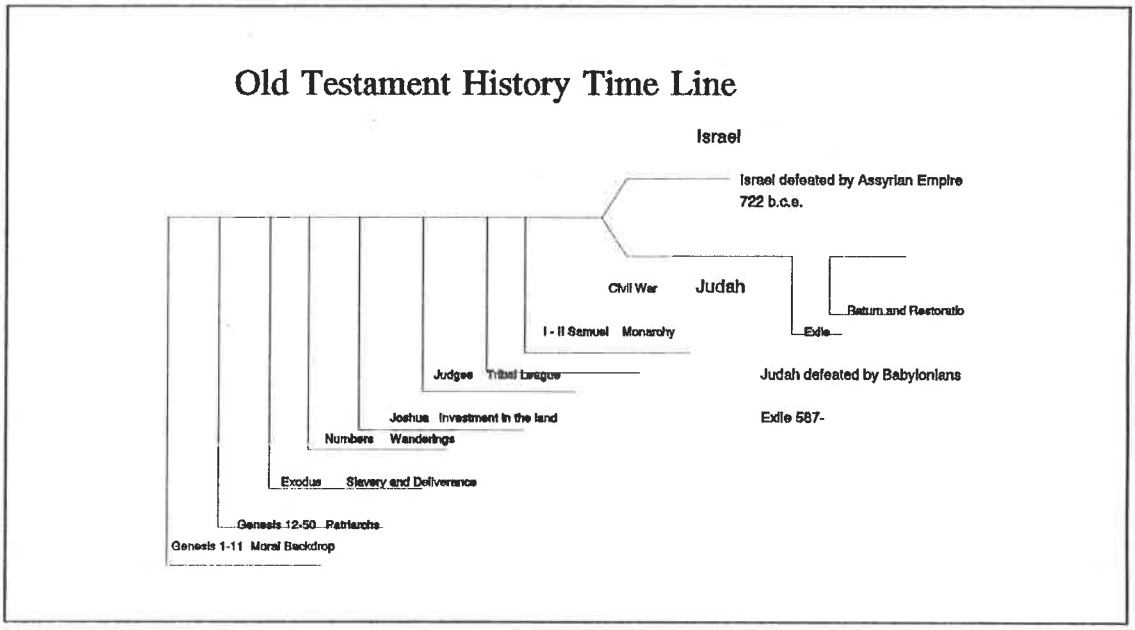
Why would stories that show the "shadow side" of the people of God be included in the Bible? From the list of characters indicate what you judge to be admirable characteristics of faithfulness. From what you know of the characters indicate what you would judge to be less than admirable characteristics.

Christian readers may recall the Apostle Paul's insight, every strength has a potential weakness. "So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall." [57]

[57] I Corinthians 10:12 N.R.S.V. See also E. Forrester Church, *The Seven Deadly Virtues: A Guide to Purgatory for Atheists and True Believers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

Session 5 An incident from the period of the Conquest
Joshua
"The appeal of God and would-be gods"

This session will focus on the Covenant Renewal which occurs at the conclusion of the book of Joshua.



Setting the Story in Context

Following years of wandering, the Israelites were anxious to establish themselves in the land they believed God had promised them. Initial attempts at invasion from the south failed miserably. Later invasions, from the east, proved much more effective.

Readers should note that the territory was not taken solely by conquest. There is also evidence that the Israelites established themselves through peaceful settlement and negotiated agreements as well. Generally, however, the period has been called the period of conquest.

Joshua 24 is set at the conclusion of the period of the conquest.

Here is an outline of the book of Joshua

God commands the land to be conquered	Joshua 1:1-9
Spies in Jericho	Joshua 2:1-24
Miraculous crossing of the Jordan	Joshua 3:1-17
Jericho falls	Joshua 6:1-27
Events at Ai	Joshua 7:1-29
Victory over Five Kings	Joshua 10:1-27
Victory over Kings of the North	Joshua 11:1-23
Distribution of the land	Joshua 13:1-23:34
Covenant Renewal at Shechem	Joshua 24:1-28

Knowing the Story

Read Joshua 24:1-25

The covenant renewal begins with a rehearsal of the history of the Israelites. As you outline the history of the Israelites note the number of times that the name of the Lord is mentioned or the Lord was pictured as speaking.

:2	Thus says the Lord
:3	I took your father Abraham
	[I] made his offspring many
	gave him Isaac
	to Isaac, Jacob and Esau
	[the period of slavery mentioned very briefly]
:5	I sent Moses and Aaron
	I plagued Egypt
	I brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery
:6-7	the miraculous event at the Sea of Reeds
:8	I brought you to the land of the Amorites
	I gave you victory, I gave you land
:9	the incident of Balaam [58]
	I delivered you out of [Balak's] hand
:11-12	Jericho, other tribes delivered by God to the Israelites
:13	land for which they had not worked given to the Israelites
:14-15	Joshua issues an invitation to make a decision
	Joshua makes his commitment

[58] see Numbers 22 - 24

:16-18	The people answer
:19-20	Joshua cautions the people. Their choice requires more than lip service. They must give up their half-gods.
:21	The people reassure Joshua that they will serve God.
:22-23	Joshua charges the people to put away foreign gods which are among them.
:24	The people affirm their decision
:25	Joshua makes a covenant

From the rehearsal of Israel's history in Joshua 24 list the ways in which God acted on behalf of the Israelites.

Responses might include:

24:3	*God led Abraham through the land of Canaan*
	God made children for Abraham
24:5-7	*God plagued Egypt*
	God got Israel out of Egypt
	Exodus
24:8	*Amorites delivered into Israel's hands*
24:9	*Israel delivered out of Balaam's hand*
24:11	*Native populations delivered into Israel's hands*
24:13	*The land was given to Israel by God*

Interpreting the story

The notion of foreign gods is quite foreign to modern readers. Modern Christians have probably never been concerned with the presence of foreign gods among them. So the question is, how can Christians interpret the covenant renewal in Joshua 24:1-25?

There are at least two possible avenues of interpretation.

The first may be familiar to United Methodists. The John Wesley Covenant Renewal Service is often used as a means by which to begin a new year.

The second is to ask the question, "What is the essence of idolatry?" In order to pursue this avenue interpreters may want to list what might be called "false absolutes". That is, people sometimes want to trust prematurely absolute formulations of doctrine, institutions, or other people. All of these alternatives are less than God. Anything that is presented as ultimate but which can be grasped, controlled, or otherwise manipulated is by definition an idolatry.

The rehearsal of God's work with the Israelites suggests immense power, God's presence in many parts of the world, intervention on behalf of a certain people.

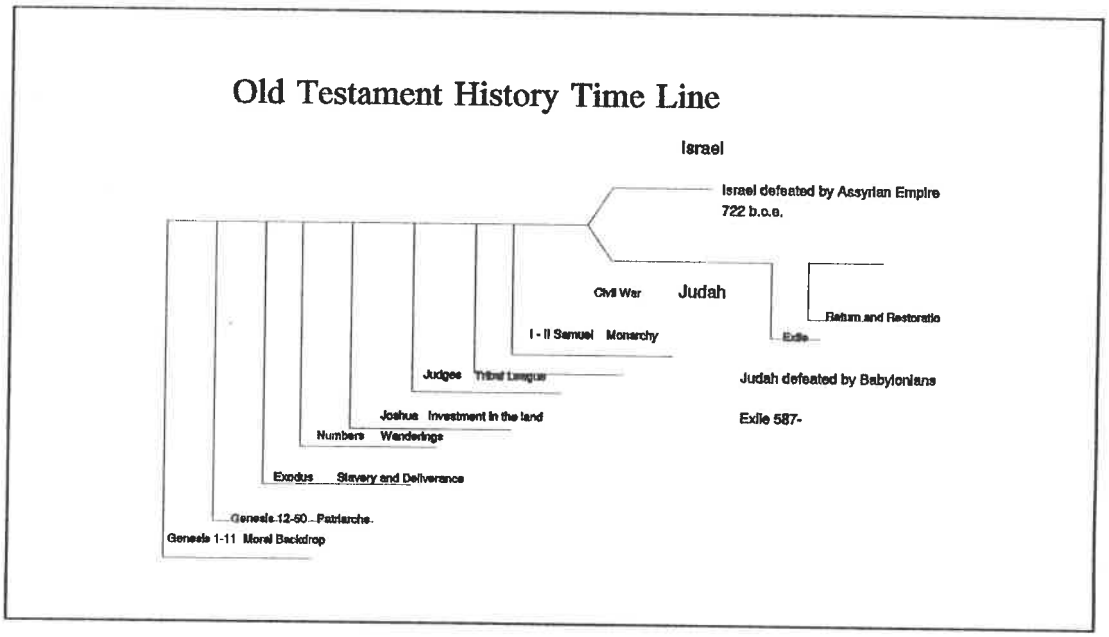
Why would the people be willing to allow any other would-be gods into their thinking? What were their "gods"?

Applying the story

If a modern-day Joshua were to rehearse the history of the United States what events do you suppose might be included? Which events would you list as moments when God intervened on behalf of our nation? Which individuals would you be willing to list as people through whom God has worked?

What would you suggest are the modern-day equivalent to foreign gods that pose a threat to Christian faith?

Session 6 An incident from the period of the Judges
Deborah and Jael
"Two heroines of the faith"



The period of the Judges follows the Israelite investment in the land of Canaan. The term *judges* refers to the military leaders whom God used in the service of God's people. One pattern dominates the entire book of Judges. The people of Israel sin, that is, they break Torah; they suffer military disaster; they pray for assistance from God; God raises up a military leader; the military leader successfully leads Israelite forces to victory; Israel enjoys a period of calm; and then Israel sins again. This pattern occurs in nearly every narrative in the book.

Here is a complete list of the judges who appear in the book of Judges:

Othniel	3:7-11
Ehud	3:12-20
Shamgar	3:31
Deborah	4:1-5:31
Gideon	6:1-8:35
Abimelech	9:1-57
Tola	10:1-2
Jair	10:3-5
Jephthah	10:6-12:7
Ibzan	12:8-10
Elon	12:11-12
Abdon	12:13-15
Samson	13:1-16:31

Knowing the story

Read Judges 4:1-24.

Here are the scenes that make up the story.

scene 1	Judges 4:1-3	setting the story - Israel sins, is being punished introduction of a major character: Sisera
scene 2	Judges 4:4-10	introduction of the second and third major characters: Deborah and Barak
	Judges 4:11	interlude
scene 3	Judges 4:12-16	the battle
scene 4	Judges 4:17-22	the aftermath introduction of the fourth major character: Jael
	Judges 4:23-24	conclusion

Before you read this story you may have had notions about the role of women in the work of God, especially in the roles of leadership. What were some of your preconceptions? List them. Be sure to be honest with yourself. One of the ways you can use to answer this question is to simply list the stories that you recall in which women played a major role. The extent of the list will in itself give evidence of some of your assumptions.

Interpreting the story

The story contains dialogue between Deborah, the military leader, *Judge*, of Israel addressing Barak. Note what she says to him. Incidentally, the class may want to read this narrative and dialogue may as a "readers' theater."

Judges 4:6	command to prepare for battle
Judges 4:9	further command, with additional word, "The Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman."
Judges 4:14	command to enter into battle

The story also contains dialogue between Jael, an Israelite woman, and Sisera, the commander of the enemy forces.

Judges 4:18-20	Jael invites the enemy to rest Sisera requests assistance Jael offers to stand guard at the door

The two stories are about women. In each the women are presented as powerful and taking the initiative. The male figures are presented as either a defeated military commander or a subordinate commander.

Clearly the focus of the chapter is on the actions of two women. Special attention must be paid to the assertion by Deborah in verse 9, "...the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman."

Why would a chapter in a book that deals primarily with male military figures include a chapter which contains not one but two women who perform roles of leadership and assistance for Israel?

Applying the story

Refer to the notes you made regarding your preconceptions as you began reading the story. Which of them do these stories challenge? What challenge does this chapter and the stories of two women evoke?

Clearly the story praises the two women for their actions. What is your response to the notion that Jael is, by implication, praised for her violent act?

An alternative approach
"Are all vows binding?"

This session will focus on the events surrounding the leadership of Jephthah. Jephthah's narrative is found in Judges 10:6-12:7. This is a rather long narrative, much longer than many in the book of Judges. The specific part of the story on which this session will focus occurs in chapter 11:1-40. Participants may be shocked to the extent that they cannot continue with the reading of this story. It is admittedly as Phyllis Trible characterizes it, a "text of terror". Since readers may be quite anxious to avoid the story altogether or rush on to conclusions about the morality of the time a disciplined approach must be employed. Though it may seem somewhat arbitrary, teachers are counseled to use the following approach since it will serve to engage the reader and the story.

Knowing the story

Read the story in 11:1-40 aloud. What are your initial responses and reactions? Make a list of responses. Reactions may include shock at the amount of violence in the story, surprise that God heeds the wishes of a military commander, bewilderment that Jephthah intends to keep his vow, utter disbelief that his daughter seems to acquiesce to her father's will.

You may find it helpful to list your objections to the story. The objections may provide a key to interpreting the story. Objections may include question as to why the story is included in our Bible. Other objections may include an observation that the morality of the story is very questionable. Someone may even assert that this kind of story is precisely why the Old Testament has always been such a problem for Christian readers. The resistance to this story (and others like it) is precisely the reason it is included in this study.

Read the story again, this time outlining the story according to its scenes.
The outline might look something like the following:

1. Introduction of Jephthah	*11:1-3*
2. Israel's plight	*11:4*
3. Jephthah becomes leader	*11:5-11*
4. Jephthah attempts to negotiate settlement	*11:12-28*
5. Jephthah makes a vow Israel prevails	*11:29-33*

6. Jephthah returns home	*11:34-38*
his daughter appears	
a dreadful vow is repeated	
7. A vow is fulfilled	*11:39-40*

Interpreting the story

In order to engage the story ask yourself the following question, "What does the tone of the narrator suggest?" Note that the story is told in a matter of fact way. The narrator does not seem terribly upset by the story. Moreover, the story is included in the Scriptures. Evidently whoever collected this material and fashioned it into its final form decided to retain this story.

Since the narrator is not particularly shocked by the story then can we assume that original readers were not shocked? The evidence of 11:40 is that the unnamed daughter was remembered for four days a year. This detail is reported in matter of fact tone. What is the purpose and focus of the story? Does the story point to Jephthah and his willingness to do whatever he must in order to be accepted by the people who had formerly rejected him? Does the story speak to the issues of violence towards women?

Another range of questions might be raised regarding the kinds of people that God will use in God's work. Jephthah was an outcast but God uses him. Jephthah evidences impatience and hastiness by making a vow. Does this mean that God will use even impatient people? Each of these issues can be seen in the narrative and debated. However, for the purposes of this study since the vow and its inevitable demands troubles modern readers, the focus of our study will be on the vow that Jephthah makes.

Note that the vow, as hasty or self-serving as it may appear, is still presented as a vow. Even after the battle has been won and Jephthah returns home, the vow is presented as binding. Why doesn't Jephthah break his vow? Doesn't the fact that his daughter suddenly and surprisingly appears at the door of his home obviate the vow? Evidently, at this time in Israel's history vows are binding regardless of the circumstances. Once a word has been spoken that word cannot be rescinded.

Applying the story

Christians want to be able to use their Bibles in living faithful lives. How can this story be appropriated by Christians? The tension in this Bible story is most clearly centered in the making and keeping of vows.

What vows have you the reader made which you have wished you could avoid keeping?
Are there any times when vows should be broken and not kept?
What circumstances might prevent obedience to a vow?
Are there vows which should be kept regardless of circumstances?

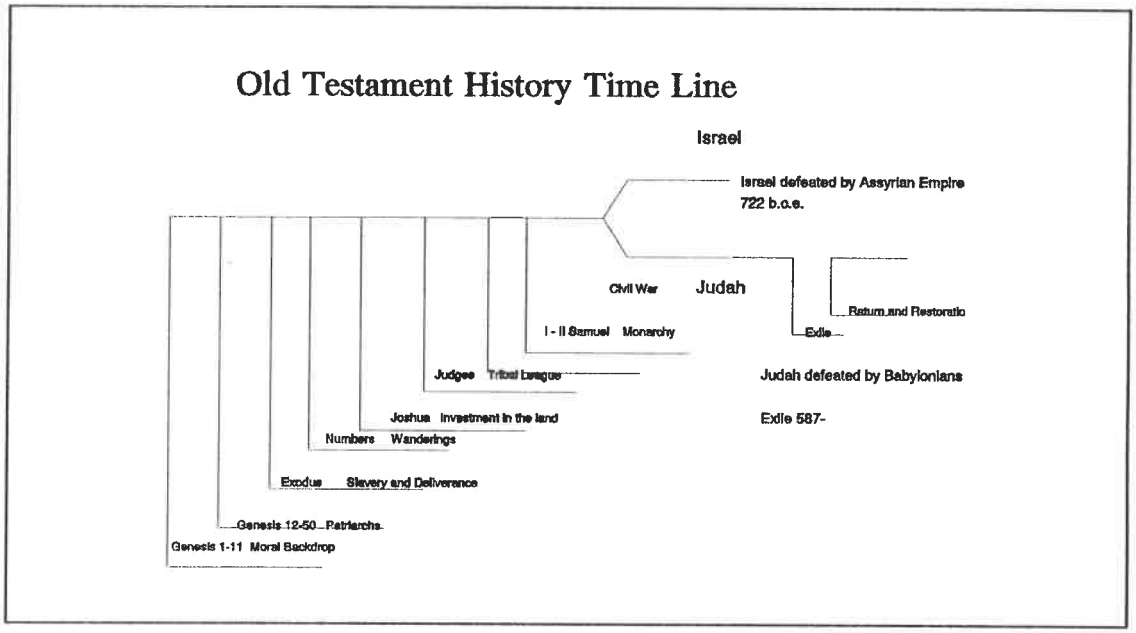
Another range of questions may focus on why the story was retained in the first place. Why would this story be included in the Bible?

Session 7 Incidents during the Monarchy
King David, Joab and Nathan
"Two men encounter authority"

What we will examine and discuss in this session is so nearly universal that we don't have to be concerned with the exceptions. Each of us must follow instructions, heed directives, or in other ways do what we are asked to do by someone in a position of higher authority. We have all become so accustomed to doing what we are supposed to do that we occasionally tend to overlook the fact that doing anything is a matter of choice. We choose to obey. We choose to heed counsel. We opt to do as requested.

Someone may want to argue to the contrary. Often we are in positions of having to do something distasteful or difficult because if we don't then we may suffer personal privation.

In the two incidents, both of which occur during the reign of David, two characters work with the king in different ways.



Setting the Stories in Context

At last Israel has the king that the people wanted. David has successfully unified the entire nation, established Jerusalem as the new capital city, and enabled the nation to achieve its largest boundaries. To all outward appearances David had to be considered an unrivaled success. However, the Bible records a telling episode that takes place during David's reign.

Read II Samuel 11:1-27. The story is quite familiar to most readers. It is the story of David and Bathsheba. Consists of four scenes

1.) David and Bathsheba
2.) David attempts to conceal his behavior
3.) David designs a method of eliminating a problem
4.) Joab willingly carries out David's orders

Read II Samuel 12:1-7. The follow up to David's act and treachery focuses on the character of Nathan. The dramatic encounter between Nathan and David consists of one scene and one parable.

1.) Nathan approaches the king with an apparent injustice
2.) The King reaches the appropriate conclusion, a terrible injustice has been done
3.) Nathan reveals the truth to David, "You are the man!"

Knowing the stories

Two characters:

Read II Samuel 11:14-27 focusing on the character Joab. As you read describe him, his actions and the results of his actions.

Read II Samuel 12:1-7 focusing on the character of Nathan. As you read, describe him, his actions and the results of his behaviors.

Interpreting the Stories

The two narratives introduce us to two very different sorts of individuals. One is a military commander who follows orders. The other is an individual who perceives moral wrong and confronts the king with the king's wrongdoing. Clearly, if any order is to be carried out it will be because there are people willing to carry them out. Historically, tragically, there are always people willing to carry out orders. Evidently the only issue seemed to have been who ordered the act. The act itself was never carefully examined or criticized. There are always people ready to carry out orders.

What were the alternatives? What could Joab have done? Could Joab have confronted David with the challenge that the order was an immoral one? What might have been the consequences for Joab? What might have happened to Uriah?

What were the alternatives available to Nathan? What else might he have done?

Applying the stories

Before we rush on to imagine ourselves playing the role of the prophet, Nathan, and condemning the military commander, Joab, let us recall moments when we found ourselves having to make decisions about what we would do in real circumstances.

On a sheet of paper describe a moment at work when the boss required you to do something that you considered improper or just plain wrong. How did you feel? What did you think were real options? What would have happened had you confronted the boss with a refusal to carry out the directive? Did you feel trapped by the business? by the need to retain your job?

Then describe a moment when you were incensed by something that was wrong, and you said something about it. What drove you to speak out? What were the other alternatives that you thought about? Did you feel threatened by those other alternatives? What caused you to be willing to risk confrontation?

What insights do you suspect the writer intended for readers to glean from these incidents?

Session 8 I and II Kings
Incidents from the Monarchy
What do we mean when we say "The presence of God?"

This session focuses on the appearance of a peculiar individual called a *prophet*. Elijah was called by God into a confrontation with the King of Israel and Israel itself.

The following is an outline of I Kings 17-21 from which this session will focus:

Elijah Narratives I Kings 17-21

Elijah in the wilderness	17:1-7
Elijah, the widow and her son	17:8-24
Elijah returns	18:1-16
Elijah acknowledged as the "troubler of Israel"	18:17-40
Trial by fire on Mount Carmel	
Drought ends	18:41-46
Ahab, Queen Jezebel, and a frightened prophet	19:1-21
An historical interlude	20
Ahab, Naboth's vineyard and the prophet	21:1-29

Knowing the Story

This session will focus on the question, "What do we mean when we say 'the presence of God?'" the first exercise the class should do is list on the board what people think of when they think of the presence of God by completing the following sentence. "When I think of the presence of God I think of..."

Each member of the class should make a contribution to the list. There are no right or wrong answers. At this point the class simply wants to get an idea of what they already think.

Read I Kings 17:1-24 aloud. As the story is read make notes to yourself when you see the presence of God. For instance, in verse 2 God is present as "the word of the Lord" which came to the prophet Elijah.

List each verse on a piece of newsprint or on the board. At this time don't attempt to characterize what the presence of the Lord is or means. Simply make note of the presence of God.

When every verse is listed then go back to the beginning of the list and characterize that presence. For instance, in verse 2 God's presence is as "word".

Responses may include:

verse 2	*Command*
verse 4	*promise of sustenance*
verse 8	*command*
verse 9	*God is present not only in Israel*
	God may be present in other locations
verses 14, 16	*provision/ miracle*
verse 18	*threat*
verse 22	*power of revival/ miracle*
verse 24	*word*

Interpreting the Story

After you have characterized the presence of God as the narrative in I Kings 17:1-24 suggests, then return to the list that was first stated. Are there any differences between the list of your understandings of the presence of God and the biblical narrative's understanding? Did you list basically positive things for God's presence?

Our orientations are sometimes similar to the biblical story. At other times our inclinations and preferences are considerably different.

Applying the story

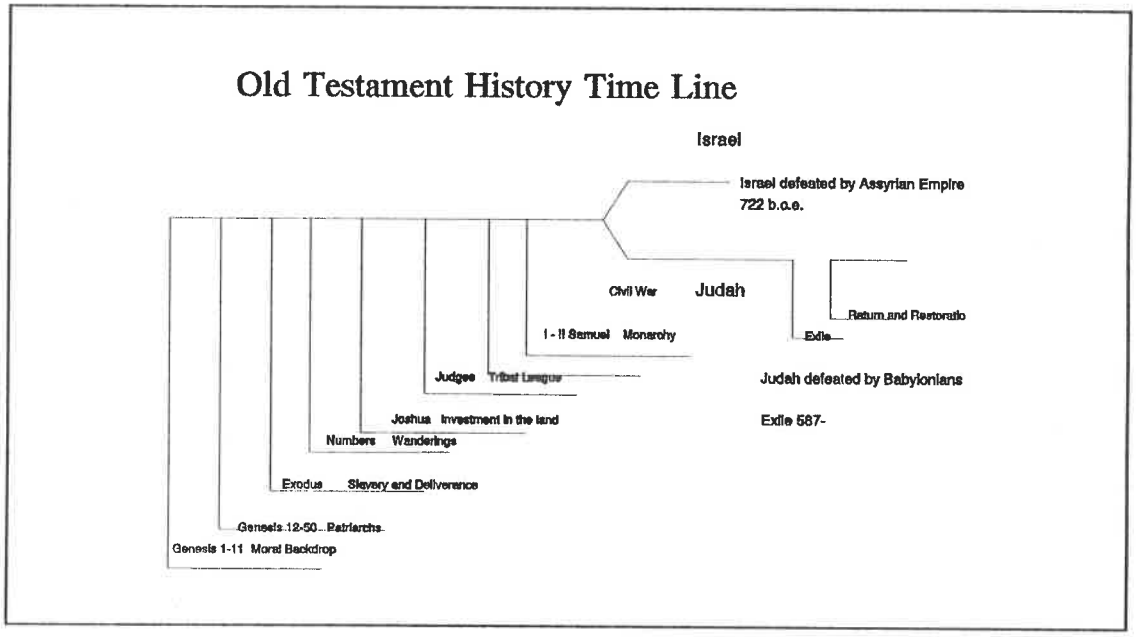
Conclude by asking the following question. What difference does it make that God is not always present with people in a safe or comfortable way? What if God is present with people and they don't know it? Can God be using people who are not aware that they are being used?

Session 9 A voice from the prophets
Amos confronts Israel

When Israel demanded a king little did the people realize that along with a king God would also bless Israel with a unique sort of individual. The unique individuals who spoke on behalf of God during the monarchy were called prophets.

The role of the prophet varied.

Amos is the first "writing" prophet. That is, he was the first prophet whose work was committed to writing. He was prohibited from speaking in Israel [59] but one of the remarkable ironies of history is that when official authority attempts to silence the word of God the word gets expressed in different ways. [60]



Setting the story in Context

The reign of Jeroboam II [786-746 B.C.E.] was long and very prosperous. During this time Israel's borders were extended north and south, her economy burgeoned, and large numbers of people enjoyed fabulous wealth. But the reign of Jeroboam II has a shadow side.

Untold numbers of people suffered terrible injustices at the hands of the wealthy. Poor folk were sold into slavery, their property was subject to seizure. In short, they suffered from the

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[59] Amos 7:12-13

[60] See Jeremiah 36:1-32.

absence of pity. [61] We would have no knowledge of the plight of the unfortunate poor unless it had been retained by the prophet.

Knowing the Story

Read II Kings 14:23-29. This brief passage summarizes the reign of Jeroboam. Without any reference to Amos what characteristics can be applied to the nation and its leadership?

Read Amos, chapters 1-3. List what each of the nation's sins were.

verses	nation	the sin
1:3-5	Damascus	*war crimes against prisoners of war* *possibly stripping the land of all potential food stuffs*
1:6-8	Gaza	*an entire people carried into exile*
1:9-10	Tyre	*covenant relationship betrayed;* *an entire people delivered into slavery*
1:11-12	Edom	*relished anger and nourished hatred*
1:13-15	Ammonites	*atrocities committed*
2:1-3	Moab	*desecration of the dead*
2:4-5	Judah	*rejection of Torah*
2:6-8	Israel	*social disorder* *the poor are sold for the price of sandals* *the poor are oppressed* *pagan sexual practices*

Interpreting the Text

From the list that you have assembled which evils seem to you to be the worst?

Would you have listed breaking the Law [see 2:4] ?

Would you have included the evils that the prophet indicates in 2:6-8 ?

Evidently the prophet considers breaking the Law/Torah and social injustice to be equally as evil and rephrensible as war crimes. Would you have reached a similar conclusion?

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[61] Abraham Heschel, Volume 1, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 29.

Applying the Text

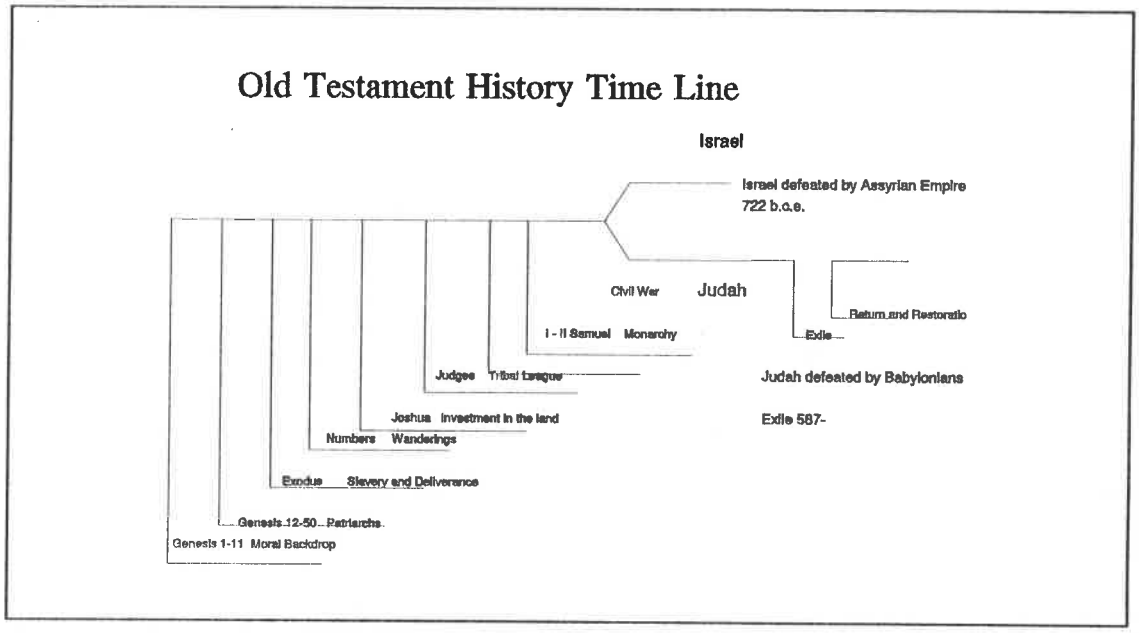
William Sloan Coffin, Jr. once observed that it is one thing to demand that righteousness flow like a stream and yet quite another to design the irrigation system. Assuming that we cannot design all of the means by which righteousness and justice can be implemented we can still indicate what righteousness and justice might look like.

Read Amos 5:21-24. What institutions or behaviors in American society would the prophet wish to address today?

Do you think that American citizens would characterize social injustice as evil as war crimes?

Session 10 Prophetic faith in a time of national catastrophe
Isaiah

This session will focus on the courageous vision and interpretation of events that swirled around Israel during her final years of independence and existence.



Setting the Text in Context

The nation of Israel met a tragic end. Israel and Judah were actually very small nations when compared to the enormous empires that fought over control of the region. Israel and Judah were strategically located. Whichever power wanted to extend its sway would have to control the territory parallel to the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea.

Many readers have a very difficult time remembering which empires hold sway at certain times. There is a very simple way to remember: A.B.C. The first empire that plays an important role in biblical history is the **Assyrian Empire**. Note that Assyria begins with **A**. The second empire that plays a large role in biblical history is the **Babylonian Empire**. Note that Babylon begins with **B**. The third great empire that plays a role in Old Testament history is the Persian Empire. The mnemonic assistance for this empire comes from the name of the king, **Cyrus**. Cyrus begins with the letter **C**.

The **Assyrian Empire** defeats and disperses the nation of Israel; the **Babylonian Empire** defeats and takes into exile the people of Judah; and the Persian King, **Cyrus**, will eventually release the Exiles from their bondage.

The prophet Isaiah, chapters 1-39, prophesied during the final years of the nation of Israel, the Northern Kingdom.

From the East the Assyrian Empire began extending its power westward, towards Egypt. Finally, after many years of anxiety, attempts at alliances and alignments, in 722 B.C.E. Israel fell to the Assyrians. Her population was deported and the territory repopulated by Semitic peoples. Israel disappeared from the political map of the region, never to reappear.

Knowing the Text

Read Isaiah 10:5-19

These verses of the prophet Isaiah came as the Assyrian Empire crushed any and all attempts to resist its expansion. The prophet dared utter what must have sounded to the people of Israel an unheard of interpretation of the crisis that threatened to engulf them in unmitigated defeat.

As you read Isaiah 10:5-19 note who speaks and what each speaker says.

Verse	Speaker	What is said
:5	the Lord speaks to Assyria	*Assyria is the rod of the Lord's anger*
:6-7		*God has sent the Assyrians against Israel. But the Assyrians are not aware of God's work.*
:8-11	the Lord continues speaking regarding the actions of an empire against Israel.	*The Assyrians think they are in control and doing exactly as they want to, eg.*
:12		*defeating any resistance.*
:13-14	the prophet speaks	*The Assyrians will have their day, but the Lord will have the final word.*
:15	the prophet speaks	*The prophet characterizes what the Assyrian king is saying*
:16-19		*Rhetorical question referring back to verse 5*
	the prophet continues	
	the prophet concludes	*When the Lord's purposes in using Assyria [against Israel] then Assyrians will be dealt with by the Lord.*

Interpreting the Text

After characterizing what is said, read the verse aloud. As you read this time add interpretation through inflection. For instance, how would the Assyrian king speak about the paltry resistance raised by the kings of Carchemish and Arpad? What would the tone of the prophet's voice sound like? How would you intone the words of the Lord as the prophet utters them?

Remember that the prophet spoke to his own people. These must have been very difficult times. The nation's existence was at stake.

Clearly the prophet has interpreted the disaster that engulfed Israel in a radically different way than most of the citizens of Israel would have interpreted the dreadful events. Isaiah's radical

faith is that even the most untoward developments and most threatening circumstances do not exceed the sovereignty of God.

Moreover, Isaiah dares to interpet the disaster by the Assyrians as the means by which the Lord intends to punish Israel for her sinfulness. What is that sinfulness? Israel had become a godless nation, see verse 6, "Against a godless nation I send him..."

How would you anticipate the people of Israel would receive the prophet's interpretation of history? How would the citizens who watch the inexorable advance of imperial might that will eventually engulf them in terrible defeat receive the prophet's charge that the disaster is actually the work of the Lord and not just another historical accident?

What would the people want the prophet to say?

What were some alternative interpretations of the catastrophe?

Applying the text

Modern readers may be offended by the prophetic interpretation of history. Certainly we would have to admire the courage of the prophet Isaiah for his radical interpretation.

What difference would it have made to the people to whom Isaiah originally spoke? Would his words have changed history? What do you suppose might have been some responses to his prophetic insight?

If the prophet Isaiah were present among 20th century people and nations what might the prophet attempt to say today?

Do you think it is still possible to interpret history as the arena in which God works out judgment and punishment on nations? Is God still in control of history?

An alternative

Some interpreters have been inclined to interpret the United States "the rod of God's anger" exerted against other, godless nations. During World War II for instance, Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a sermon entitled, "God talks to a dictator". [62] Among Fosdick's points was the charge that when the Democracies, then at war with Nazi Germany, imagine God speaking they must remember that God speaks also to every nation, not just the apparent enemy. Fosdick called for national penitence because, ". . . the dictators have come as an inevitable consequence of our joint sin. . ." [63]

What do you suppose would be the response of people in your church to the charge that when God speaks to an empire bent on self-aggrandizement and control God speaks to the United States as well?

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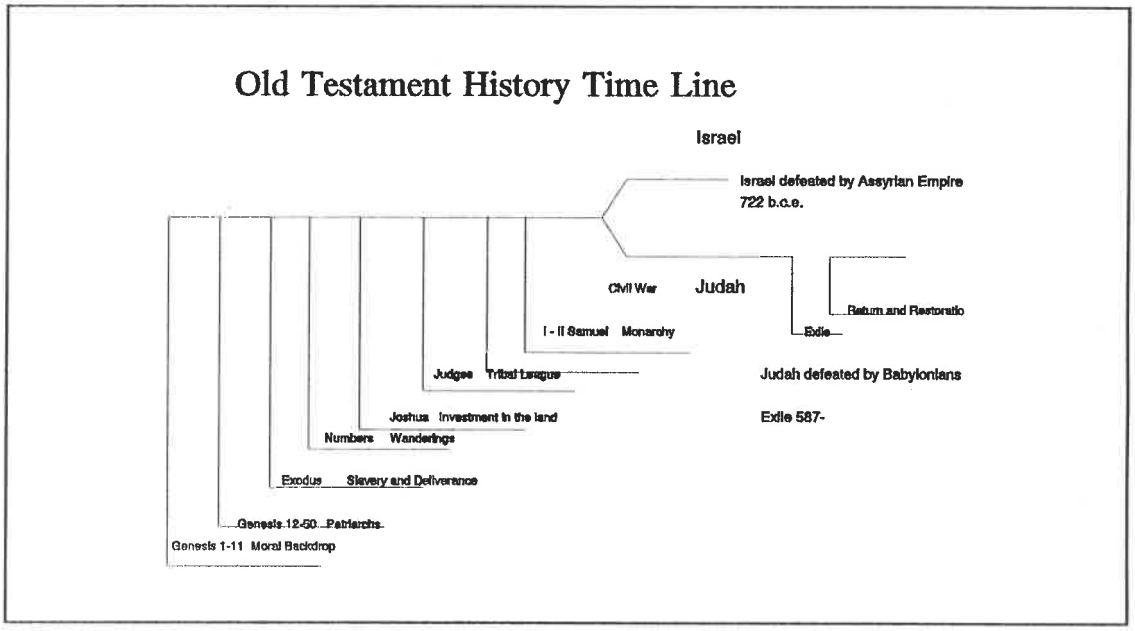
[62] "God talks to a Dictator" *Riverside Sermons* (New York: Harper, 1958), pp.334-342.

[63] Ibid. p. 337.

Session 11 From the time of Jeremiah
"To whom should we listen?"

Decisions and perspectives would be much easier if we had but once voice to which to listen. We would not be so concerned about what is right and wrong or how we should interpret anything if we had but one way of looking at things. But, in every age, there are always a variety of voices demanding a hearing and proclaiming the truth. The question facing God's people in every era is simply stated. To whom should we listen?

The threat of false prophecy plagued Israel practically from the earliest days of the monarchy.



Setting the text in Context

The text for this session is necessarily lengthy. As catastrophe had engulfed Israel in 722, a little over a century later catastrophe overwhelmed the surviving Southern Kingdom, Judah. Remember that this is the second major empire to extend its sway into the region along the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean Sea.

The Babylonians, under Nebuchadnezzar, had defeated the Assyrians and then taken over their territorial holdings. Judah, which had survived the devastating defeat that had overwhelmed Israel a century earlier, now suffered defeat. The final years of Judah's independence were characterized as a troubled occupation. Because resistance by Judah continued, even after a governor had been appointed by the Babylonians [in fact, the governor was assassinated] Judean citizens were deported into exile.

To Judah's benefit, the Babylonian policy was not as severe as the Assyrian Empire's policy had been against Israel. You'll recall that the Assyrians deported the native population and repopulated the territory with foreign groups of Semitic peoples. The people of Israel never

returned to their homeland. The Babylonians, on the other hand, deported the highly skilled, the leadership, the affluent and powerful people who might be able to foment further resistance or revolt. A large number of citizens who had survived the slaughter and defeat were allowed to remain in Judah and Jerusalem.

Among those people who remained in Jerusalem was the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah had struggled for years to convince his people that they should repent and change their ways. But his words were futile. The nation continued on its course. Now that the nation had been defeated he had to continue his work over a great distance with the people who had been taken into exile.

Knowing the Text

Read Jeremiah 28:1-17. Note who the major characters are. Hananiah, a popular prophet confronts Jeremiah, an authentic prophet. At stake is the question of how long the Exile will last.

As you read chapter 28 note what each prophet says regarding the Exile.

Hananiah	Jeremiah
28:1-4 The yoke of the King of Babylon has been broken. The Exile will last for only two years.	28:6-9 Jeremiah appears to wish that the Babylonians had indeed been broken and that the Exile would last for only two years. Would that he could utter, "Amen" to the popular prophet's interpretation. 28:8 However, Jeremiah refers to history and the test of true prophecy. True prophets always prophesied disaster and catastrophe.
28:10 Hananiah performs a symbolic act. He takes a wooden yoke and breaks it. He then says that the Babylonians will be broken similarly, soon and easily.	28:12 Evidently Jeremiah was uncertain what to do for a while, ie. "Sometime after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke-bars..." 28:13-16 Jeremiah receives instruction. He is to go to Hananiah. This time he is to take iron yoke-bars. The nation will have to endure a long Exile. 28:14 The exile is not a mistake or an accident of history. The Exile is the work of God, "I have put upon the neck of all these nations a yoke of servitude..."

28:15 Hananiah has been a false prophet and convinced the people to believe a lie. He must die.

Interpreting the Text

Imagine yourself facing the prospect of being taken away from your home and nation. Your nation has suffered defeat. You have been among the fortunate who survived the slaughter. But now you must leave your beloved land and go to a foreign place far away from everything that is familiar and comfortable. Two men speak to you about the prospects for the coming years.

Each of them claims to be an authority. One of them tells you that the time of Exile will be relatively short, only about two years. The other contends that the number two is correct but the term is for nearly two generations, not two years. Which of the men do you want to listen to? Which of them will have what sounds like good news for prospective exiles? Which of the men will receive a larger audience and be welcomed?

When you have had to receive bad news did you want to hear it as bad as it possibly could be or did you want to hear it modified and softened?

Applying the text

The problem that Jeremiah encountered is one that challenges practically every generation. Hope is often confused with optimism. Hananiah was a popular prophet who said what people wanted to hear. He said that things weren't as bad as they might appear. Jeremiah on the other hand said that things were much worse.

Select a current critical issue that confronts our nation. What would you suppose a prophet like Hananiah might have to say about that critical issue? What would his solutions sound like? For how long a period of time will the critical issue challenge us?

Now look at the same critical issue from the perspective of a person like Jeremiah. What would Jeremiah have to say about the critical issue? How would he characterize it? How long will the issue challenge and confront us?

Had you been a prospective exile in the 6th century B.C.E., which of the two prophets would you have wanted to hear? Which prophet was vindicated by events?

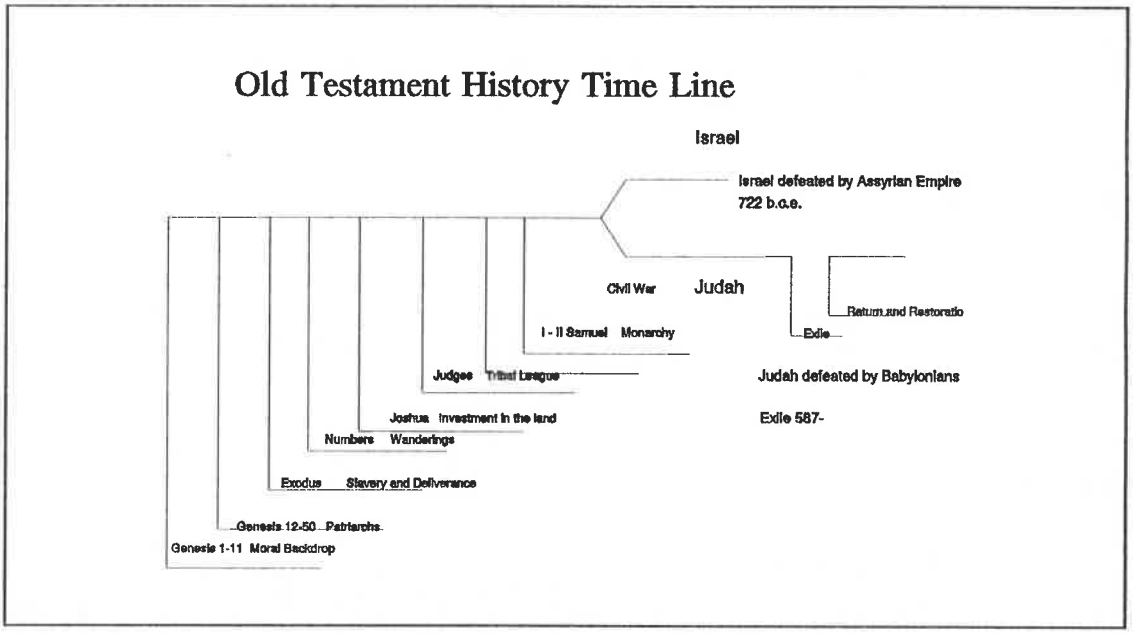
Who would you be willing to identify as speaking prophetically today?

Session 12 Exile
A voice from the Sanctuary

The catastrophic end that Jeremiah had envisioned and which the people had long denied was possible finally came. In 587, after years of struggle Judah and Jerusalem were devastated by Babylonian forces. Three separate deportations saw thousands of Jerusalem's citizens marched into exile hundreds of miles to the east, past the wilderness in the land of Babylon.

Some well-meaning people had declared that the Exile would last but for a short time. Jeremiah and others declared that the Exile would last for quite some time.

Among the few possessions that exiles took with them, they took memory. And an awful memory it was. Sufficiently troubling that they wondered how they could still be people of faith in a foreign land.



Setting the Texts in Context

Surprisingly little writing speaks directly about the period of the Exile. The reason may in part be that no writing could fully capture the anguish and theological difficulty caused by the destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, and the land of Judah.

One piece does come to us from the Exile. Psalm 137 reflects that deep emotion, the memory of destruction, and the theological hope of the Exiles. However, the Psalm is not an easy one to read. In fact, many Christians find it impossible to accept the entire Psalm since it contains some very harsh expressions of emotion and contempt.

This session will focus on the question that underlies the Psalm and which may still speak to our generation.

Knowing the Text

Read Psalms 73 and 137. On first reading there may not appear to be much relationship between the two. Through the course of this session we will find that there is one very important event and place in each of the Psalms.

One way to understand Psalm 73 is to follow the thought of the speaker. Two points will assist understanding these Psalms. The first is to remember where and under what circumstances the Psalms would have been spoken. The second is to characterize what the worshiper is doing when the words are uttered. As you read, characterize what is being said or done in each section of the Psalm. To the right side of your characterization mark those passages that are particularly troubling to you.

characterization	Personal responses to the verses
:1 the speaker repeats a widely accepted truth	
:2 the speaker confesses that he has almost slipped	
:3-9 the speaker tells why he was attracted to the arrogant,wealthy, and powerful. Let's face it, there are times when the wealthy, powerful, and influential seem to have a very easy life.	
:10-12 other people seem to give the arrogant more respectthan common people get; worse yet, some people even wonder how God can know and still let this happen Confession: When what we want to believe about how God will treat the arrogant. We have to wonder why the arrogant, wicked, and powerful are allowed to have such sway.	
:13-14 the speaker confesses that the apparent unfairness of the universe seems to have made a mockery of his faith	
:15-20 the speaker confesses that there was only one place where he could keep his thinking straight, the sanctuary. It was in the sanctuary	

where the ultimate end of things re-emerged

:21-26 the speaker remembers what his behavior had been during his foul mood but still, God remains with the individual who has remained loyal and a person of integrity.

:27-28 the speaker concludes with affirmation that it is good tobe near God

Now read Psalm 137. Some parts of this Psalm are very difficult to read because they contain very harsh expressions of anger, resentment and desire for revenge. Nevertheless, read the entire Psalm, again characterizing what the speaker says. [64]

characterization	Personal Responses
:1 Exiles are pictured gathering in the only place they can, by the river; in their gathering they remember home	
:2-3 Exiles were depressed and dejected because they were forced to sing songs. Their songs were songs of Zion, of how God would protect Jerusalem and the Temple they knew that the devastation of Judah and the Temple made a travesty of those songs	
:4-6 Exiles wonder how they can sing any songs of the Lord in the land of exile	
:7-9 Exiles then offer a prayer. The Lord is asked to remember. The worshiper believes that someday the people who wronged Judah will themselves be paid back the payback will be in kind, terrible kind	

[64] Songs of Zion include Psalm 46:4-7; Psalms 48, 76, and 87.

Interpreting the Texts

To begin with, we must be quite honest. Psalm 73 is relatively easy to read and understand. As you read you made notes of which verses concerned or bothered you.

The place where these Psalms would have been uttered - worship, temple, community

The content of the worship - rehearsal of worshiper's true feelings, no emotions unwelcome or rejected

The point where the worshiper seems to resolve the tension of uncertainty, anger, mistrust or rage - in prayer

When the worshiper has prayed then the worshiper can let the issue be in God's hands.

Applying the Texts

The two Psalms converge at two points.

1.) The importance of worship in the life of faith
2.) The importance of trusting God

What alternatives does the worshiper have? If the deepest hurts and strongest desires cannot be expressed in worship where can they be expressed?

Do we really believe that when something has been committed to God in prayer that the issue is taken care of and we don't have to do it ourselves? Note that in Psalm 137 the worshiper is not the individual who exacts revenge. Instead, the Lord with whom vengeance lies, receives the prayer. Evidently the worshiper envisions a day when someone else will repay the Babylonians for what they had done.

For Christians Psalm 137 causes particular difficulty because of its apparent contradiction to the injunction Jesus gave regarding forgiving our enemies. [65] Perhaps the following considerations may mollify resistance to the Psalm.

What can anyone do when the notion of wishing the enemy dead comes to mind? Are there not three alternatives?

1. deny the fact that evil thoughts and wishes have been imagined
2. repress them so that the thoughts are not either acted out or dealt with in any conscious manner
3. offer them honestly to God.

The shortcomings of the first two options are clear. If we deny the fact that evil thoughts enter our minds then we are simply not telling the truth either to ourselves or God. In fact, every Christian is occasionally haunted by unwanted thoughts that creep into our minds. In part, the desire to deny such thoughts stems from the sense that God will not forgive such weak moments or evil thoughts.

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[65] Luke 6:27, Matthew 5:39-42. See also Romans 12:17, 13:8-10.

If we attempt to repress evil thoughts then we are simply delaying the inevitable. If they are not confessed openly to God then evil thoughts have a way of getting acted out against other people.

Denial and repression are not healthy responses to very natural and spontaneous emotions and thoughts. Inevitably repressed feelings get expressed in unexpected and detrimental ways. For instance, if an individual is uncomfortable with personal feelings of depression then, whenever this individual encounters someone else who expresses similar feelings, the individual may be tempted to silence the other. Why? Because we cannot tolerate in others what we know to be present in ourselves until and unless we have learned that God is forgiving and compassionate. We are forgiven for our weaknesses and failures. Therefore, we don't have to condemn others who remind us of what we have done or who we are.

Confession, on the other hand, is very healthy and appropriate. Confession is also absolutely universal. We all need to confess. There is no temptation which has occurred to anyone that is not familiar to everyone. [66]

Conclude this portion of your study by noting the feelings or anger or resentment that you would rather not confess. Then offer them to God as a short prayer. The question challenging Christian readers may well be whether or not Christians trust the graciousness and compassion of God as much as the Psalmist appears to have trusted God.

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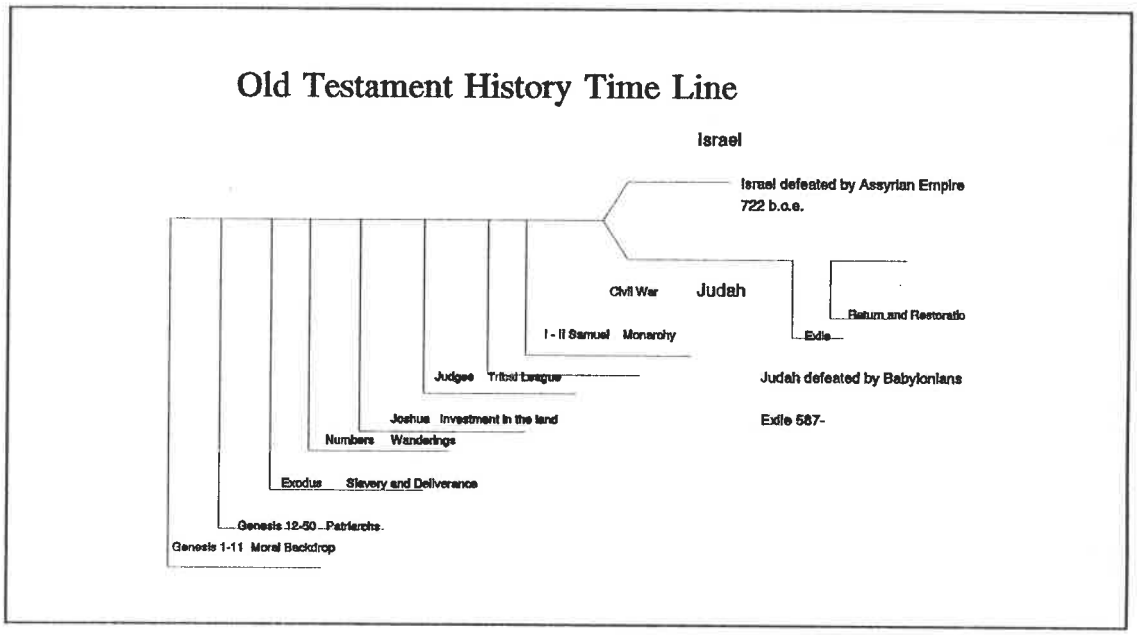
[66] I Corinthians 10:13. "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone." N.R.S.V.

Session 13 From the Return and Restoration
An official edict and a simple story

At length the Exile came to a merciful end. Cyrus, King of the Persian Empire, issued an edict releasing Jews from their captivity in Babylon.

This session will focus on a problem that developed in the years immediately following the Return to Jerusalem and Judah.



Setting the Texts in Context

The returning exiles had a very difficult problem on their hands. Many people had married native Babylonian women. Of course they had been instructed to by the prophet Jeremiah [recall the letter to the Exiles in Jeremiah 29]. However, now that the Exiles have returned to their native land after nearly two generations of exile they have to re-establish themselves.

The problem they face is one of identity. It was absolutely crucial that in a time of rebuilding the people have a specific and special identity.

As you read Ezra 10:1-43 make notes as to how the problem of identity will be resolved according to Ezra's edict.

Now read the book of Ruth. You will note immediately that according to the first verse of Ruth the story is set in the period of the Judges. However, scholars have found that the sedentary life that the book of Ruth reflects was quite unlike the harsh realities that the period of the Judges exhibited. Therefore, many scholars suggest that the Book of Ruth is actually a story, a kind of parable, which originated precisely at the time of Ezra's edict regarding mixed marriages.

Knowing the Text

Which of the two narratives strikes you as being more acceptable? Do you prefer the edict regarding divorce and ending mixed marriages? Or do you prefer the story of Ruth with its implicit embrace of the foreigner among the people?

Applying the Texts

Christian identity has always been a matter of balance and tension. Paul instructs Christians to be in the world but not of the world. [67]

Some Christians will attempt to remain removed from any and all tainting of the world. Consider the way of life that Amish people live. Consider how some denominations declare their uniqueness and distinction from the world.

Yet, Jesus of Nazareth seems not to have minded associating with people who were different.

How do you think Christians should be in the world and yet not of the world?

Alternate Texts

In Deuteronomy 23:1-8 a variety of people are excluded from the assembly of the Lord. In Isaiah 56:1-7 instructions are given that "foreigners" should not be excluded from worship.

Knowing the texts

These two portions of scripture appear peculiar to most modern Christian readers. Why would anyone be prevented from being a part of the worshiping congregation?

Read Deuteronomy 23:1-8 and Isaiah 56:1-7. List the segments of the population that were to be excluded. Do the verses give any indication why these people should be excluded? If the verses do not give any indication for exclusion why do you suppose the demand of exclusion is made?

Applying the texts

We may not be comfortable with verses that actually list specific portions of society that are to be excluded from worship. However, we do probably have notions about what kinds of people we expect to see in worship. List the characteristics that you think are appropriate for people who wish to worship with us. Are there any characteristics that you would deem sufficiently detrimental so as to warrant exclusion from worship? What about criminals? homosexuals? feminists? atheists? foreigners who have no knowledge of Christian traditions? Liberals? Fundamentalists?

What are the advantages of worship services in which all members are like-minded or at least familiar with common traditions and expectations?

What are the liabilities of including people who are different from us or who are not familiar with our traditions?

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[67] Romans 12:2

At least one other story, this one in the New Testament, has to do with exclusion. One of the most problematic incidents in Jesus' ministry is his encounter with the Syrophoenician woman. Readers may want to reflect on the implications of the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman from the perspective of the desire by the community to retain its peculiar identity. [68] Is it not possible that the narrative of Jesus' encounter with that unnamed woman has something to do with the fact that, as an outsider, the woman had no knowledge of the tradition of Judaism, the aspirations of the nation, the meaning of a yearning for the Messiah. As an outsider she could not participate in the life of the faith community with the same integrity. [69]

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[68] Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30.

[69] I am indebted to William Muehl for this insight. See "Confronting God as Judge" in *Why Listen? Why Preach?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), pp. 56-59.

Evaluation

Personal Goals

1. Learning a new teaching technique. Practically everything I had done in previous educational undertakings had been variations of didactic methods. All of my previously written/published work has followed a didactic pattern. The challenge of this project was to develop a teaching style that involves readers imaginatively in the biblical text. Correspondingly, the challenge in writing is to re-create in print what I learn to do in a classroom setting. Essentially as the teacher I spoke/taught. Learners were supposed to listen/learn. Previous experience with adult Bible study had been characterized by diminishing numbers involved. The reasons were never clear. This project served as an experiment to see whether or not I could develop a new approach to adult Bible study and what the effect of different teaching / learning styles would be.

2. Learning to trust the text. In my previous teaching I assumed that readers had read the biblical text. Therefore, class study time consisted primarily of interpretation and application. Learners were not intentionally involved in the actual study of the biblical text. After much reflection it appears that to some degree this method implies a lack of trust in the biblical text. What would happen if non-trained people seize the text and do with it what they will? Does this not mean that the text can be violated? Doesn't this leave open a wide path to misinterpretation and inappropriate application? These are not purely hypothetical questions. In three previous pastoral appointments I had encountered small groups that had seized the biblical text and done their own interpretation. Sect-type orientations developed and claims of exclusivity followed. Therefore, for years I hesitated granting the authority of interpretation to readers.

3. Writing an adult curriculum. The end result would be a 13 session curriculum/study series on the Old Testament based on an outline of the history of Israel. The chronological schematic serves as the outline of the sessions.

Didactic lectures present material in systematic fashion. Context associates and Bible study groups all concurred that learning from a didactic style is initially much easier than working through discovery or inductive methods. Inductive learning requires the risk of posing questions and investigating without a clear-cut conclusion already established. At the beginning of this project three different groups simultaneously expressed discomfort with inductive or discovery methodology. Their expectations, based on prior experience with other teachers and preachers, was that they would listen as the teacher did the work of interpreting and explaining. The hard work of reading the biblical text, posing pertinent questions, forming possible responses and discovering new insights had always been the teacher's responsibility. Thus, for the first few sessions all three groups were apprehensive and somewhat reluctant.

As the project developed and the technique became familiar, participants were far less apprehensive. Indeed, many participants began anticipating questions, issues, and possibilities within the texts. At length all participants stated that they appreciate being taught how to enter into a biblical story. After the story or incident is located in its appropriate historical era and the significant dynamics affecting people in that era are recalled, participants are much more able to enter into the story imaginatively. The result of this work is that participants are able to remember the story and its import much better now that they have had to work through texts themselves rather than simply listening to the "expert".

Group cooperative effort makes a great deal of difference. As one member said, "I don't think as well at home on my own as I do when I work with the group in class. Something different happens when we can talk with each other and learn from each other's perspectives and perceptions." Participants observed that there are many ways of interpreting practically every verse in the Bible. For some participants the primary task of interpretation had been to find the correct interpretation. As the study sessions continued people learned to appreciate differences in interpretation and approach.

The goal of producing a 13 session curriculum based on the Old Testament was successfully achieved. A schematic outline of the history of Israel is the organizing principle. Participants are able to learn about the flow and development of Israel's history. Practically every class session included the time line. The time line served to

1. locate the material in Israel's history
2. place events and eras in correct chronological order
3. give visual reinforcement of the historical eras of Israel's history
4. provide an outline in which a large amount of the Old Testament can be placed

Initially I had anticipated a great deal more history. Personal interests and skills had dominated my thinking. Church members generally are not consumed by interest in Israel's history. The issue became a matter of balancing the history of Israel which is central in the Old Testament with the need for theological reflection and questions that pertain to contemporary faith of modern Christian readers. As one critic contends, "The chronology is of little significance without some interpretive framework." [70] The resulting curriculum, therefore, focuses attention on a dilemma that emerges from an historical era which is at the same time a dilemma that challenges contemporary readers. The historical period serves as a backdrop against which individuals wrestle

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[70] Don Rogers, personal correspondence February 7, 1991.

with demands of faith, theological understandings and interpretations, and actions that are required.

Goals in Ministry

A distressingly large number of Christians are uninformed about the history of Israel in the Old Testament. Therefore, this project was designed to

1. Recover the Old Testament into the memory and imagination of the Church
2. Develop a group of members who are familiar with the history of Israel in the Old Testament.
3. Equip members with a method by which to enter into Bible study imaginatively. [eg. without primary concern for ideology or doctrinal formulations or evidences].
4. Strengthen the church through Bible study.

How the personal goals were met

Personal reflections as well as reflections by both Context Associates and members of two Bible study groups all point to significant personal change during the course of this doctoral work. The groups' evaluations included the following observations and characterizations.

"When you first taught you told us what you wanted us to know. Now you include us in on your work."

"I kept waiting for you to tell us what we were supposed to conclude. Instead, you really were sincere about each of us engaging the text and coming to our own conclusions."

"You seem much more patient now as I work through a story."

"There was never a put-down during our entire study time."

"People seem to feel very comfortable with your teaching now. They aren't afraid to risk."At first I thought it would be much easier if you would simply give us the answers and tell us where we were to end up in our study. But after working with this method I learned to trust my own skills and insight."

"You seem to trust the Bible more now."

How goals in ministry were achieved

The evaluation of achievement goals in ministry was more difficult to ascertain. A written evaluation distributed to participants evoked the following responses.

1. Recover the Old Testament into the memory and imagination of the Church:

"Before this study I never knew what the history of Israel was."

"With the time line I can place a Bible story in its historical time."

"Since I know more about the Bible I can understand sermons better."

"Now that I know more about the Bible and its history I can see how well the preacher can correlate the Old and New Testaments."

2. Develop a group of members who are familiar with the history of Israel in the Old Testament.:

"I never thought of reading the Bible with imagination. The idea is very helpful to clarify what the stories may mean to us...now!"

"...makes the Bible come alive."

"Now I'm more apt to return home to study."

"...stimulates thinking by challenging previous perceptions."

"When teacher employs imagination I can picture myself being right there in the action." "Most helpful to stimulate personal imagination."

"Painting a background picture then taking a particular perspective makes for 'imagined reality'"

3. Equip members with a method by which to enter into Bible study imaginatively. [eg. without primary concern for ideology or doctrinal formulations or evidences].:

"tell it like it is; a prostitute is a prostitute." "I get a feeling of what it was like in those days: history and culture."

"Rev. Sargent interpretive techniques are the best that I have heard from any speaker and I've been to Chautauqua for 9 seasons."

"I learned that almost all study is self-study."

"Whenever we say anything you act like we have said something important and that we are really smart.

I felt like he valued my interpretation."

"This technique teaches us to do our own digging."

"I want a guide written that I can refer to and refresh my understanding of these beautifully written terrible stories."

"The Old Testament came alive...in terms we could enjoy as we understood the setting, the people and their carrying out of religious practices. It all seemed so natural for we had the background clearly in mind."

"You can more easily make connections with the New Testament."

"Up to this time I have always been afraid of the Old Testament. I didn't want to study because I was afraid of feeling stupid."

"Working with a group like this helps, we can think about it and discover it together."

"I used to think of church as just the sermon but now I realize that without study we wouldn't get as much out of the service and the sermon."

Perhaps the most encouraging comment was made by one of the context associates for whom this entire undertaking seemed impossible. He had been brought up in a Roman Catholic family. His tradition had always been to listen to the priest and accept, without question, the priest's authority. His education is in the sciences. Therefore, he was always pressing towards closure and definite

interpretations. His standard question was, "After all is said and done, what is the answer supposed to be?" After many months of work he began to comprehend the imaginative method which this project attempts to develop. His final comment was, "I think I finally have learned that I have the skills and authority to interpret the Bible on my own now."

4. Strengthen church through Bible study:

"By working with others in study we have a stronger sense of our fellow members." "We are much closer because of our deep discussions."

"I feel stronger as a person."

"One feels so happy to understand the Old Testament better that he's eager to do more for the rest of the congregation."

A final word

This program has a vulnerable point. If participants insist upon a single interpretation or arriving at a specific understanding, then this approach will not work well. Over the course of six months of experimentation four individuals found the approach either too threatening or inappropriate. The method that this program promulgates appeared inappropriate for what they considered to be valid Bible study. Unfortunately they withdrew from the groups.

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Suggested readings and comments

Because a bibliography gives little indication as to how resources can be helpful the following annotated bibliography is included.

The range of material dealing with the Bible, the Pulpit, and the People of God spans a wide variety of literature and disciplines. The following discussion includes seven of the rubrics under which bibliographical materials are found. This listing is by no means exhaustive. Indeed, the list of published materials on any of the categories defies rapid summary. Instead, this list and essay are intended to illustrate the range of materials that are available.

Scripture and Interpretation.

At the outset it has to be noted that there is no such thing as a single means by which to interpret scripture. The notions of inspiration and authority are constantly in tension with critical studies. Nonetheless, we must begin with a sense of what it means when we speak of the Bible as Scripture. An excellent introduction to the inspiration of scripture is Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1980). Achtemeier examines the range of understandings of what inspiration means within the Christian tradition. His work is helpful since he avoids polemic and provides a gracious accounting of what a wide variety of Christians believe. An earlier work is Austin Farrer *The Glass of Vision*, (Dacre Press: Westminster, 1948). Farrer concludes that inspiration is a unique combination of the action of God and the capacities of the writer. A more contemporary overview is Bruce Vawter *Biblical Inspiration* (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1972). This is a standard overview in the "Theological Resources Series". Karl Barth *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1957) is a classic treatment of the manner in which the Scriptures are to be understood. The book is written from an Evangelical perspective with the cataclysm of World War I as a backdrop. C.H. Dodd *The Authority of the Bible*, (Glasgow: William Collins Sons and Co. Ltd., 1929) treats the Bible as revelation but not without the necessity of human participation in the reflection and recollection of that revelation.

The issue of how stories and traditions evolve into sacred stories and later sacred texts or scriptures is one of the truly fascinating dramas of the people of God. For the notion of the importance stories play in human life Reynolds Price *A Palpable God* (North Point Press: Philadelphia, 1985) is excellent. James A. Sanders *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text: Canon as Paradigm*, (Fortress: Philadelphia, 1987), *God Has a Story Too: Sermons in Context*, (Fortress: Philadelphia, 1979), and *"The Bible and the Believing Communities"* in *The Hermeneutical Quest: Essays in Honor of James Luther Mays on his Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed. Donald G. Miller, (Pickwick Publications: Allison Park, Pennsylvania, 1966) are all excellent treatments of how stories became

treasured and then preserved as authoritative for the community of faith. *God Has a Story Too* combines a concise treatment of what Sanders calls "contextual hermeneutics" in biblical preaching with a set of sermons which illustrate his hermeneutical principles at work in his own preaching. As an example of what deep study and reflection on the Scriptures yields see Martin Buber *On The Bible : Eighteen Studies by Martin Buber*, Ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, (Schocken Books: New York, 1968). James Barr has contributed to the discussion regarding the importance of scripture, especially in light of the demands and influence of Fundamentalism. *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism*, (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1983) provides an historical survey of the issues at stake for the Church.

Though most church members would claim that the Bible has authority few can articulate what that authority is. James Smart *The Strange Silence of the Bible in Church: A Study in Hermeneutics*, (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1970) presents a summary of the crisis facing the Protestant church. Specifically, the Church runs the risk of losing its Bible altogether unless preachers and teachers alike recover it for the congregation's life of faith. A similar perspective is discussed in John Barton *People of the Book?*, (Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, Ky., 1988). Barton examines the false alternatives of either a liberal or fundamentalist stance. Michael Fishbane *Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics*, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1988) examines the same debate from a Jewish perspective. The chapter entitled "The Teacher and the Hermeneutical Task" is particularly helpful. In this chapter he summarizes the four methods of scriptural interpretation.

Other historical surveys of biblical interpretation include Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*. (1984). One of the classic studies of how the Bible emerged is Hans von Campenhausen *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, (Fortress: Philadelphia, 1968). For those wishing to read the entire history of the Bible and how it has been interpreted the classic three volume series *The Cambridge History of the Bible* Vol. 1, Ackroyd, P.R. and C.E. Evans, *From the Beginnings to Jerome*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1970), Vol. 2, G.W.H. Lampe, *The West from the Fathers to the Reformation*, (1969), and Vol. 3, S.L. Greenslade, *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, (1963) are unsurpassed. In addition to the comprehensive surveys each volume has an extensive bibliography for further reading. Books that address the issue of the interpretation of the Old Testament include John Goldingay *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1981). His work provides a succinct overview of scholarship and approaches to Old Testament interpretation. Perhaps the best overview of scholarly and interpretive issues is Brevard S. Childs *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979). Childs is one of the first to argue for a canonical approach to the study of Scripture. One of the advantages of this volume is

that short but excellent bibliographies are provided for every book of the Old Testament. For those interested in summary essays regarding Old Testament history, theology and sociology *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, Ed. Claus Westermann, translated by James Luther Mays, (John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1963) is helpful.

Contemporary writers who argue for the congregation's involvement in the interpretation of scripture include Phyllis A. Bird, *The Bible as the Church's Book*, (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1982). Bird illustrates the history of how the Bible emerged and how it has been interpreted as evidence that the task of interpretation has always been the responsibility of the Church. Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*, (John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1977) argues for the Bible as the only means by which a Christian can interpret the world and history. In *The Creative Word: Canon as a model for Biblical Education*, (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1982) Brueggemann argues for the use of the Bible as Scripture, that is canon, without the interference of historical criticism. Along the same line Walter Wink *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study*, (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1973) declares that the old, critical method of study has become bankrupt. He argues for an experiential and imaginative involvement with the Scriptures. In my estimation Wink's work tends to ignore what might be called "the prior claim of the canon". His work emphasizes the reader's imaginative and emotional involvement at the expense of the text itself. A recent book by William H. Willimon argues that the distinctive mark of a Christian congregation is that it is *Shaped by the Bible* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1990). Perry B.Yoder *From Word to Life: A guide to the art of Bible study*, (Herald Press: Scottdale, 1982) presents his argument from the Anabaptist tradition of the Mennonites. A powerfully stated argument appears in Arthur I. Waskow *Godwrestling*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1978). Written from a Jewish perspective this volume illustrates the manner in which *midrash* is done.

The issue of interpretation or hermeneutics is moot in many congregations. Some people believe with utter sincerity the bumper sticker "God Said It, I believe it, that's enough". For other congregants the issue of interpretation is much more complex. James M. Efird *How To Interpret the Bible*, (John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1984) is a good introduction for lay people. Another helpful and brief introduction to interpretation is John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A beginner's handbook*, (John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1982). Though written for preachers this volume could also be helpful for lay people. Another short book written primarily for preachers is William D. Thompson *Preaching Biblically*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1981). His summary of hermeneutical principles is especially helpful.

Among the best introductions to the Bible as literature is Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, (The Belknap Press of Harvard University: Cambridge, Mass., 1987). Of course, the Bible as literature presumes a hermeneutic which the lay person may not

discern. Other standard introductory works which rely upon the broad rubric of what is called the historical critical method include Bernard Anderson *Understanding the Old Testament*, (Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1986) and Stephen L. Harris *Understanding the Bible: A Reader's Introduction*, (Mayfield Publishing Company: Mountain View, California, 1980).

Another hermeneutic is at work through W. Lee Humphreys *Crisis and Story*, (Mayfield Publishing Company.: Mountain View, Calif., 1990) which assumes three major crises in Israel's history each of which influences how the scriptures were formed and interpreted. An interesting combination of ancient history with contemporary political factors is John W. Drane *Introducing the Old Testament*, (Harper and Row: New York, 1985). His work attempts to draw analogies between the forces and tensions characteristic of both biblical eras and contemporary readers' time. Paul Hanson *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible*, (Harper and Row: San Francisco, 1987).

The liability of many of the standard introductions to the Bible is that the student does not necessarily have to read the biblical text itself. That is, if an individual wants to learn the history of Israel then any standard history such as John Bright *A History of Israel*, (Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1972), Siegfried Herrmann *A History of Israel in Old Testament Times*, (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1981), or Martin Noth *The History of Israel*, (Harper and Row: New York, 1958) will serve very well. Noth of course begins the history of Israel with the dramatic events at the Sea of Reeds. Bright and Siegfried work on the chronological history of Israel in relation to the surrounding cultures and empires. More exhaustive, multi-volume treatments of Israel's history include Frederick J. Foakes-Jackson *The Biblical History of the Hebrews to the Christian Era.* Again, however, these volumes replace the need to examine the biblical text itself. At the turn of the twentieth Century a number of guides were published. These works combine extensive references to the Bible verses that are expanded upon in the written text. These include George F. MacLear *A Class Book of Old Testament History*, (1887) and Charles Foster Kent in the classic series *The Kings and Prophets of Israel and Judah*, *The Student's Old Testament*, and *The Testing of a Nation's Ideas*. College level texts included E.S. Young, *The Old Testament History*, (Student Company, 1915). In the pre-World War II era George A. Barton *A History of the Hebrew People* c.1930 appeared in the Century Historical Series. A recent publication correlates verifiable information with the Bible's witness. John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, (Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1986) places Israel's history within the context of near eastern history and culture.

Curriculum resources

Though they are not presented as curriculum per se the following materials present readers with helpful workbook, self-study approaches to the Bible. The most extensive material is the four

volume series *Mastering Old Testament Facts*, (John Knox Press: Philadelphia, 1978) by Madeline H. Beck and Lamar Williamson, Jr.. These four workbooks include programmed reading, art and activities along with chapter tests. A single volume workbook covering the Old Testament is Celia Brewer *A Guide Through the Old Testament*, (Westminster/ John Knox Press: Louisville, Ky., 1989). This workbook introduces the reader to the chronology of Israel's history as well as to the variety of literature in the Bible. Though not a workbook Hans-Rudi Weber *Experiments With Bible Study*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981) provides alternative ways through which adults enter into Bible study. One of the great advantages of this work is that the techniques and tools can be used with any size group. The 1981 Ohio Pastors Convocation featured Hans-Rudi Weber as the Bible study leader. He employed four of the models in his book with nearly 1,000 preachers. An older but helpful book that discusses tools and techniques is F.W. Danker *Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960).

For planning a Christian education program the following overviews are helpful. Though dated Sara Little *The Role of the Bible in Contemporary Christian Education*, (John Knox Press: Richmond, Va., 1961), D. Campbell Wyckoff *Theory and Design of Christian Education Curriculum*, (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1961), *Tools of Curriculum Development for the Church's Educational Curriculum* Cooperative Curriculum Development, (Warner Press: Anderson, Indiana, 1967) are helpful. More recent publications Howard P. Colson and Raymond M. Rigdon *Understanding Your Church's Curriculum*, (Broadman Press: Nashville, 1983), Iris V. Cully and Kendig Brubaker Cully, *A Guide to Biblical Resources*, (Morehouse-Barlow Co., Inc.: Wilton, Connecticut, 1981), and Iris V. Cully, *Planning and Selecting Curriculum for Christian Education*, (Judson: Valley Forge, 1983) list many more recently published resources. Donald E. Miller, *Story and Context: An Introduction to Christian Education*, (Abingdon: Nashville, 1987) is another helpful survey of the questions and issues that must be examined in the design of any curriculum. Miller employs a hermeneutic that keys on the contemporary interest in story.

Every denomination has its own curriculum. The United Methodist Publishing House has the Graded Press. Over the course of years a variety of curriculum have been published. Not surprisingly the curriculum's hermeneutic has reflected the dominant hermeneutic of each era. For instance curriculum of 20 years ago emphasized the critical studies, J, E, P, and D and the like. More recent curriculum *Genesis to Revelation* for instance gives readers and teachers alike six years reading through the entire Bible. Questions range from re-statement of what the Scriptures say to an examination of critical issues facing contemporary Christians. United Methodism's most recent effort is *Disciple*. Subtitled "Becoming Disciples through Bible study" this multi-media approach requires extensive reading and preparation through reading the Scriptures by both student and

teacher alike. It is not intended to replace regular Sunday morning church school efforts. Instead, it is to be an alternate day, 34 week study.

Oletta Wald *The Joy of Teaching Discovery Bible Study*, (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1976) and *The Joy of Discovery in Bible Study*, (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1975) offer good introductions into imaginative Bible study.

The Roman Catholic Church has produced an Old Testament survey *These Stones Will Shout* by Robert Link. This curriculum consists of workbooks and study guides.

A non-denominational thematic study of the Bible is published by *Kerygma*. This is far and away the most thematic of all mainline curriculum.

Joseph P. Russell *Sharing our Biblical Story*, (Winston Press: Minneapolis, MN., 1979) provides a lectionary approach. Combining the liturgical year, the lectionary and free interpretation of the significance of liturgical seasons this book serves as a guide for using liturgical readings as the core of church and family education. As with nearly every resource having to do with the lectionary this resource is not particularly helpful with regard to the history of Israel and the Old Testament by sheer necessity. The lectionary itself is minimally concerned with the Old Testament. The only resource available which illustrates a distinctive effort to design a lectionary based on another model besides the liturgical year is Allen A. McArthur *The Christian Year and Lectionary Reform*, (SCM Press: London, 1958). Though dated, this work illustrates what a preacher can do with a different liturgical rhythm. McArthur designed a lectionary based on the Apostles Creed. Since he wrote the work while serving the Peterhead parish the lectionary is commonly referred to as the Peterhead Lectionary.

Reader Response Criticism

Under the rubric "reader response criticism" the following books have been helpful in defining the approach as well as implications regarding reading biblical materials. Mark Allan Powell surveys the approach in "Types of readers and their relevance for biblical hermeneutics", *Trinity Seminary Review*, Volume 12, Number 2 (Fall, 1990). Pamela Mitchell "Why care about stories? A theory of narrative art", *Religious Education*, Volume 86, Number 1 (Winter, 1991) offers insights into the nature of readers' imaginative participation in both narrative and appropriation of reading. Robert Coles *The Call of Stories*, (Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 1989) describes the power of stories in the realm of mental health. The implications, however, are clearly not restricted to professional mental health workers. A more technical work in which readers' roles in reading literature is discussed is Wolfgang Iser *The Implied Reader*, (The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1974).

Christianity and the Old Testament

Among the more demanding issues involved with any study of the Old Testament is the question, "What has the Old Testament to do with my life as a Christian?" The question inevitably arises in any course that addresses the Old Testament. Elizabeth Achtemeier argues for the significance of the Old Testament in *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel*, (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1973) and more recently in *Preaching from the Old Testament*, (Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 1989). Both of these volumes address clergy who are involved in the weekly task of preaching. A less scholarly but nonetheless helpful discussion for laity is found in Paul J. and Elizabeth Achtemeier *The Old Testament Roots of Our Faith*, (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1962).